



Comhairle Contae **Lú**  
**Louth** County Council

Louth County Council's

# Play Policy

2026-2031



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# 1. Introduction and Executive Summary

This is the agreed Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031. It provides a strategic framework for the Council and its partners/stakeholders to assist in the development and delivery of accessible, inclusive play opportunities, spaces and experiences over the policies five-year timeframe.

The Louth County Council 2026-2031 Play Policy sets out:

- Our definition of play (types of play, how we play and where we play)
- Our understanding of the importance and benefits of play for all (from childhood and through our adult lives)
- The strategic context within which the Play Policy has been developed, launched and will be implemented
- The context for play in the County (where we are starting from)
- Our vision for play in the County
- The mission of the 2026-2031 Play Policy
- Our 2026-2031 Play Policy Outcomes
- Our 2026-2031 Play Policy Principles
- How we will put our 2026-2031 Play Policy into practice

## What do we mean as play...our definition of play

Play is the universal language of childhood but is also something which is sustained and evolves across our teenage years and through our adult years. There are many definitions of play, fundamentally play is:

- Behavior, which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated
- What children, young people and adults do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons
- A natural, spontaneous and voluntary activity which we all benefit from throughout our lives For the purposes of the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy, play is defined as:

**‘Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviors that actively engages the child, teenager or adult’**

The Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 recognises that play means different things to different people and takes different forms.

## 2. Types of Play

Play is not a uniform activity. Research has identified that it is complex and that there is a form of play for every aspect of childhood and adult development. Research on the benefits of play identifies that there are five broad types of play. Each of these types of play incorporates a number of widely recognised characteristics which describe the nature of meaningful play experiences. The five broad types of play are outlined below:

### Physical Play:

This involves active movement that develops motor skills (e.g. jumping, climbing, dancing, skipping, bike riding and ball play), rough and tumble (with friends, siblings or parents/guardians) and fine motor practice activities (e.g. sewing, knitting, colouring, cutting, modelling, manipulating action and construction toys). Physical play includes the opportunity for people to introduce risk and learn about risk through their chosen play activity (especially for young people and teenagers). Physical play also supports people to engage with built and natural environments.



### Play With Objects:

This form of play supports people to explore and develop the physical world they find themselves in and the objects they find within it. Physical play begins as soon as infants can grasp and hold on to things themselves. This develops from initial exploring objects or materials to find out how they feel and behave and progresses to play which includes building, making and constructing.



### Symbolic Play:

People are equipped to use a wide variety of symbolic systems, including spoken language, reading and writing, numbers, visual media (painting, drawing, collage) and music. As children and adults begin to master these types of activity, they become an important element within the range of play activities they engage in. Symbolic play supports development of technical abilities and the ability of the human to express and reflect on their experiences, ideas and emotions. It has a key role to play in emotional and cognitive development and resilience.



### Pretence/Socio-Dramatic Play:

Often known as pretend play, this is the most prevalent type of play amongst young children and emerges from around the age of one year old. Whilst most commonly observed in young children it evolves through adolescence and adulthood through storytelling, role play, simulation and digital gaming. It is particularly prevalent in urbanised settings or in the evolving more technologically advanced modern world (using technology). High quality pretend play has repeatedly been shown to be very closely associated with the development of cognitive, social and academic abilities. It can have an important role in developing socialisation skills and working in a group or team setting.



### Games With Rules:

Young children and teenagers are strongly motivated to make sense of their world and their part in that world. They recognise that there are rules and approaches adopted by people to "fit in" to that world. As a consequence, from a very young age, children enjoy games with rules and frequently invent games to which they develop and apply their own rules. These include physical games such as chasing games, hide and seek, throwing and catching etc. These types of play actively have an important role in building motor skills and co-ordination. As children mature (and move from teenagers to adulthood) more intellectual games such as board games, card games, electronic and computer games and a range of sporting activities provide opportunities for them to play and have fun accepting the rules applied to that game or pastime.



Effective play opportunities are typically characterised as self-directed, adventurous, voluntary or self-chosen, meaningful, pleasurable, active, symbolic, process-oriented and intrinsically motivated.

Our 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy will seek to promote and facilitate all five types of play under our overarching definition of play. Within these forms of play the policy will promote play which incorporates risk, innovation, intergenerational play activities and the use of formal and informal play spaces.

# 3. The benefits of play... why is it important for the people of County Louth

Play is central to both the rights and the experiences of children and young people. However, it is important to recognise that play is not only an early year’s activity for children and young people but one that should be a central part of people’s lives throughout their life. It also contributes to adults developing both physical/motor and soft skills (including resilience).

The research is clear about the benefits and tells us that engaging in play is good for people’s health and well-being. It is a way of creating community so that children and then adults develop a sense of identity and belonging. Play is a way of communicating, exploring and thinking, it benefits the person by:

- Increasing self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-respect
- Improving physical and mental health
- Providing opportunities to play with other children/adolescents/adults
- Increasing confidence through developing new skills
- Prompting imagination, independence and creativity
- Providing opportunities for inclusive play
- Developing social skills and learning
- Building resilience through experiences of risk and challenge, problem solving, new and novel situations
- Providing opportunities to learn about their environment and the wider community

The vital importance of play in children’s lives was recognised internationally when it was enshrined as a fundamental right for all children in the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child. Article 31 states that:

- States recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts
- States shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in a cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity

Other articles in the Convention also have an impact on children’s right to play. For example, Article 23 requires equitable treatment for children who are disabled; Article 30 confers on children from minority ethnic groups the right to practice their own culture, language and religion, Article 12 states that children’s views should be taken into consideration in all matters that affect them (which includes opportunities to an environment for play).

The Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 recognises that the realisation of the right to play is not the only reason for promoting and providing children’s play. A review of evidence and research demonstrates the important contribution of play to children’s wellbeing and health. It establishes how important it is for children to have time and opportunity to play freely throughout their childhood, making their own choices and building their understanding of

themselves and how they relate to other people and the environment around them.

Appendix 1 contains a summary of the research on the benefits of play and by extension the case for investing in play.





## 4. Strategic Context for the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy

The implementation of the 2026-2031 Louth County Play Policy is set within a context of National, Regional and County wide strategies and policies including:

- National Development Plan 2021-2030
- Programme for Government 2025
- National Planning Framework (Project Ireland 2040)
- Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy
- Get Ireland Active! National Physical Activity Plan
- Embracing Ireland's Outdoors – National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027
- Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028
- National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030
- Healthy Ireland Framework (2013 – 2025)
- Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly: Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019 – 2031
- Louth County Development Plan 2021-2027
- Louth Local Economic and Community Plan 2024-2029
- Louth County Council Corporate Plan 2024-2029
- Louth Age Friendly Strategy 2026-2031
- Louth Outdoor Recreation Plan 2026-2031

This Louth County Council Play Policy also works in tandem with and complements the Local Sports and Outdoor Recreation Plans for the County <https://www.louthcoco.ie/en/services/community/active-louth/>

Appendix 2 summarises how the Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 complements and contributes to this range of National, Regional and County wide strategies and policies.

# 5. Context for the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy

The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy provides a strategic framework to guide the development and delivery of high quality, accessible and inclusive play opportunities for both younger and older people throughout County Louth.

The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy builds on a draft developed through local engagement establishing a locally informed play policy reflecting local needs and priorities. The play Policy aligns with national and international policy frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Play Policy.

This policy recognises that accessible, inclusive and high-quality play opportunities is not only a right for children but also an essential element of social infrastructure that benefits all age groups. It supports a cradle-to-grave approach, incorporating youth of all ages, including the 3 young; younger and older teens; adults and senior citizens, encouraging intergenerational, nature-based, and culturally inclusive play. Appendix 3 sets out examples of play opportunities for teenagers and adults.

A recognised model of play provision is commonly presented in the form of a hierarchy of play spaces which guides the scale and type of play opportunities provided within communities. The following hierarchy has been adopted for the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy:

- 1. Local Area for Play (LAP) – small play areas intended primarily for younger children and their carers, generally located within 100–200 metres of homes.
- 2. Local Equipped Area for Play (LEAP) – equipped play areas designed for children beginning to play independently as well as younger children accompanied by carers, typically located 500–1000 metres from homes.
- 3. Neighborhood Equipped Area for Play (NEAP) – larger play areas serving a wider neighborhood and providing a broader range of play opportunities for older children and teenagers, generally located 1000–1500 metres from homes and acting as a focal point for the wider community.

The context for the Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 is formed by:

- The population profile of the County and its demographic characteristics
- Our citizens’ perceptions and experiences of play experiences, opportunities and spaces/ environments identified through public consultation and the outputs of the Active Louth Play Policy survey
- Current provision of play spaces, facilities and environments across the County

## Louth County Council Demographic Characteristics

According to Census 2022 findings of the Louth County Council area, Louth have a growing and diverse population. Key findings can be summarised as follows:

| Factor (as at 2022)                  | Louth   | Ireland   | Comparison                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------|---------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Total Population                     | 139,703 | 5,149,139 | Louth has 2.5% of the national population                                                                          |
| Population aged 0-19 years           | 39,068  | 1,307,900 | Louth has a higher percentage of 0-19 year olds;27.9% compared to 25.4% nationally                                 |
| Population aged 20-29 years          | 15,613  | 633,300   | Louth has marginally less people in the 20-29 age range compared to the average nationally;11.1% compared to 12.2% |
| Population aged 30 - 64              | 65,124  | 2,420,100 | Louth has marginally less people in the 30-64 compared to the average nationally; 46.6% compared to 47%            |
| Population aged 65+                  | 19,898  | 787,800   | Louth has less people over 65 compared to the average nationally;14.2% compared to 15.2%                           |
| Population change 2016-2022          | 8%      | 8%        | Population growth is in line with the national position                                                            |
| People with good or very good health | 82%     | 85.7%     | The County has less people with good or very good health compared to the national average                          |
| Education: Third level               | 36.3%   | 52%       | Louth has significantly less people progressing to third level education compared to the average nationally        |

- County Louth is the smallest County in the province and the State in terms of the area, and it is the 14th largest County in terms of population size
- Louth has a younger population (average age 38.2 years in 2022) compared to the state average (38.8 years). In 2022, over half (52.3%) of the population was under 40 years old, lower than the national average
- In the RSES, Drogheda and Dundalk are designated at two of the EMRA region’s three Regional Growth Centres. Both towns are targeted for significant growth up to a population

- of 50,000 by 2031. In 2022, Dundalk’s population was 43,112 and Drogheda had a population of 44,135.
- The population density of the County (as of 2022) is 169.1 people per square kilometer (more than double the National average) making Louth the second most densely populated County in the Republic of Ireland (after Dublin)
- As of 2022, Louth was also the second most urbanised county in the State, with more than two thirds (69.7%) of the county’s population living within urban areas

The deprivation index is measured using the three following categories: demographic, social class and labour market situation. The table below outlines the relative index score for County Louth and how it compares from 2016 to 2022:

| Area         | Relative Index Score 2022 | Relative Index Score 2016 |
|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| County Louth | -3.59                     | -2.96                     |

Source: Pobal HP 2022 Deprivation Index

This socio-economic summary confirms that Louth is a growing, highly urbanised population with one of the highest population densities in the state, increasing demand for accessible, high quality play opportunities. As indicated by the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, County Louth is marginally below average, which reinforces the need for equitable and inclusive play provision that prioritises disadvantaged areas.



Consultation Process and Feedback

Consultation for the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy was wide ranging and inclusive, gathering views on play from a broad range of stakeholders including children, young people, adults, and older people. The consultation sought to understand current play opportunities, identify barriers and challenges and inform the future delivery of inclusive and accessible play spaces within County Louth. The consultation process involved:

- An online public survey completed by 227 participants, including 160 children and young people
- Three public facing community events held in Ardee, Drogheda, and Dundalk with 60 people attendees
- 34 thematic workshops involving a range of stakeholders
- One dedicated workshop for teenagers and young people
- Several strategic planning workshops were held with Louth County Council and Louth Sports Partnership officers to understand the current as is situation and develop the vision, mission and guiding principles for play in County Louth

Active Louth Play Policy Survey

The following table provides the insights, need and barriers to play provision in Louth highlighting the context for a Louth County Council Play Policy. They have been identified through a survey completed by 227 citizens:

| Insights                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Needs                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Insights                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 94% of respondents know of play spaces in their area</li><li>• The top 3 play activities for children include, playing outside with friends; Being active – run, jump, swing, ball games, skip, chase; Playing sports</li><li>• Public playgrounds, the garden and sports fields/MUGA’s are the 3 most play spaces currently used by young people</li><li>• When outdoor play is restricted by weather or safety, children may default to digital options, although solo digital play (30%) remains far less popular than outdoor socialising (60%).</li><li>• Bad weather is the single largest factor stopping children from being active</li><li>• Outdoor environments are the most popular settings for activity, with playing outside with friends being the top-rated favourite activity for 60%</li><li>• Children most frequently use informal outdoor spaces, including playgrounds, the street, and their own home gardens</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respondents specifically want to see more intergenerational play spaces</li><li>• Respondents would like to see more adventure playgrounds, teen spaces, natural play spaces, public play spaces and indoor play options</li><li>• Respondents found the three top priorities for future play provision in Louth to allow more play spaces close to housing; children’s right to play should be a priority in local planning and public spaces; and safer access to parks and play areas</li><li>• A strong demand for increased indoor facilities and longer opening times of these facilities</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 49% of respondents do not have play spaces/areas within walking distance of their home</li><li>• 28% of respondents rated the quality of nearest play spaces/ areas as poor</li><li>• 24% of respondents found local play spaces not inclusive and welcoming for all children and young people</li><li>• 171 respondents found teenagers to be the most underserved by current play opportunities</li><li>• Anti-social behaviour, safety concerns and no locally available play spaces/areas are seen as the biggest barriers for young people to play locally</li><li>• 50 children reported having “nowhere to go to play,” and 48 are worried about how safe it is to play outside</li></ul> |

**The Story So Far- Louth's Existing Public Play Facilities**

A review of the current play offering in County Louth has been carried out to achieve an overview of the baseline situation. The mapping exercise was further informed by engagement with key stakeholders and consultees, including NGBs, local community groups and residents from across County Louth.

**Physical Provision**

There is a range of existing physical provision (urban and rural) for play in County Louth as illustrated in the graphic below:



# 6. Recognising Barriers and Challenges for Play in County Louth

The Play Policy recognises that there are two factors which influence the extent to which children and adults are playful and have access to quality play environments and opportunities. These consist of environmental and social factors which support or act as a barrier to children’s and adult’s natural playfulness.

The environmental barriers to play in the County can range from the lack of sufficient play provision in the County’s urban communities and especially larger urban settlements. The lack of a culture (not only in Co Louth but also nationally) of designing in elements in public realm and urban streetscapes removes an opportunity for people in urban environments to use their built environment as play environments. Urban

infrastructure and by animating the public and non-transport infrastructure elements of that space. From a social barrier perspective, the play policy must recognise that.

Throughout the consultation process, a number of environmental and social barriers and challenges affecting play across County Louth were identified. The most commonly cited issues impacting play provision in County Louth included:

- Anti-social behaviour and safety concerns
- Lack of inclusive play opportunities
- Poor maintenance of play spaces
- Adverse weather conditions
- Absence of locally available play spaces/areas



The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy recognises that Louth is one of the few Local Authorities across the State where the majority of its people live in settlements and environments described as urban rather than rural. In total 69.7% of the county's population live in urban environments. This is likely to increase, given the progression towards the development of key urban settlements across the county.

Existing research identifies that living in urban environments can have a negative effect on the playfulness of children, including those who live in supportive households, but whose parents, carers, guardians and teachers receive a range of environmental hazards and dangers and become overly risk averse and over protect and over supervise their children.

Therefore, the promotion of play and provision of opportunities and spaces to play facilitated by this Louth County Council Play Policy must recognise its urban context and support actions, initiatives, projects and place making which enhances existing play experience and provides new play experiences.

This Play Policy seeks to evidence the barriers to play in County Louth for children, teenagers and adults and promote and develop actions and interventions (led by the County Council and other stakeholders which addresses them).

## 7. Our Vision and Outcomes for play in County Louth

Our vision is that everyone living in or visiting County Louth has the opportunities, spaces and environments to have their 'rights to play' made reality regardless of age, gender, finances, physical or cognitive abilities or cultural background.

Our Vision Statement for the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy is:

**“By 2031 Louth will be a County where everyone can play everywhere”**



**The purpose of the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy**

The play policy establishes a framework to build on the current play experience of people across the county from our youngest to our oldest citizens. The purpose or mission of the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy is:

**“Louth County Council leads a shared approach to increasing access to inclusive, high quality, intergenerational play experiences and opportunities across County Louth’s built and natural environments”**



**Our 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy Outcomes**

Over the five years of the Louth County Council 2026-2031 Play Policy the Council aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- We will have a more collaborative approach to decision making and investment in play; both across the Council’s departments and between public sector stakeholders
- We recognise both the urban and rural characteristics of the County and invest in play spaces and opportunities which facilitate play in both these contexts
- The benefits of play will be promoted and more fully understood by decision makers and the wider public
- Play provision and opportunities across the County will be inclusive and intergenerational

# 8. Our 2026-2031 Play Policy Principles

The following principles underpin the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy and how the organisations taking responsibility for its implementation will go about the activities and actions required to bring it to life:

| Principle                                                                              | We will deliver on the Louth County Council Play Policy Principle by:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Collaborative planning and delivery of play opportunities                              | Enhanced collaboration in the planning and delivery of play opportunities will be achieved by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Using a co-design process with stakeholders to develop and agree a Louth County Play Strategy</li><li>• Report on decisions and progress through the Rural Development Co-ordination group</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Evidence-based decision making                                                         | Decisions relating to the investment in play facilities, spaces, environments, programmes and initiatives will be led by evidence. This will be achieved by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Using population data to map where people live, their age profile and their access to built and natural play environments</li><li>• Using public and community engagement processes to confirm local need</li><li>• Accessing precedent examples of design and approaches from peer local authorities to bring proven practice to our decision-making processes</li></ul>                                                                                                     |
| Commitment to meaningful public engagement in key decisions relating to play provision | Play is for people and therefore we will place people at the centre of decision-making processes on investment in play opportunities by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adopting public participation guidelines and using them to influence the assessment of need, design and decision making for play provision</li><li>• Ensuring that all stakeholder groups can influence the design and decisions on play investment and provision using the Public Participation Network (PPN) to ensure that inclusion groups have a meaningful input to the process</li></ul>                                                                                                   |
| Optimising our built and natural environments as places to play                        | The Play Policy recognises that County Louth has almost 70% of its population living in urban settings. The County also has a range of quality natural environments (land, water, hills and beaches). The Play Policy will seek to make these environments accessible from a play perspective by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encouraging urban design in public realm and civic spaces which integrates formal and informal play elements supporting urban street games and sports</li><li>• Liaise with the Outdoor Recreation officer to create opportunities to play in the County’s natural environments which respects their habitats and biodiversity</li></ul> |

|                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Accessibility to play opportunities                                    | <p>Play is a right for all of our citizens across the County (urban and rural) and the Play Policy will seek (where practical and achievable) to make play opportunities accessible. The Policy will seek to deliver on this principle by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Animating existing urban spaces as environments which support play through design and provision of play programming</li><li>• Where practical developing active travel options for accessing urban and rural play environments</li><li>• Encouraging play focused planning in new housing developments</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Sustainable management and development of play provision               | <p>Investment in spaces, places and facilities to support and encourage play will be viewed and managed as long term assets so that their impact is sustained. This will be achieved by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agreeing a management and maintenance plan for any capital investments in play</li><li>• Including any new play facilities and spaces in the Councils annual maintenance and management plan</li><li>• Have an agreed response time for any reported issue with the condition, presentation and safety of Council owned and managed play facilities and spaces (indoor and outdoor; urban and rural)</li></ul>                                                                                                                                            |
| Promotion of safe digital/technology play activities and opportunities | <p>The Play Policy recognises the potential for good play experiences using digital and emerging technologies whilst accepting that they bring challenges which require to be acknowledged and managed. This principle will be addressed by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agreeing and adopting Digital Play Safety Policy (aligned to the Department of Children)</li><li>• Periodically review the Digital Play Safety Policy to ensure that it maintains its relevance as technology advances and evolves</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Promotion of the benefits of play within the County                    | <p>The benefits of play for all will be communicated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promoting the Louth County Council Play Policy</li><li>• Support and promote National Play Day, delivered annually by Louth Sports Partnership (LSP), as a key event in the County's play calendar using it to encourage participation and highlight local play opportunities</li><li>• Bringing together stakeholders which have the potential to contribute to the implementation of the Play Policy and communicate the benefits and encourage them to work collaboratively to the vision and outcomes set out in it</li><li>• Carry out independent evaluation of investment in play facilities, spaces, environments and programs and publish and disseminate the findings</li></ul> |
| Adventurous and innovative play opportunities                          | <p>The Play Policy recognises that the approaches to play can and should Play can be seen as a range of traditional pursuits and activities encourage innovation and will seek to achieve this by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Visiting and exposing decision makers to design and programme approaches in other councils and countries which can be applied to the context in Co Louth</li><li>• Upskilling play practitioners, community leaders and parents to introduce adventurous and innovative approaches to facilitating play in our range of built and natural environments</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                |

# 9. Putting the Play Policy into Practice

The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy creates a framework to build on the current opportunities and environments for our citizens and visitors to the County to play how they want to play regardless of age, gender, physical or cognitive abilities, cultural background, where they live and what they have in terms of resources and finances.

The Council will lead a co-design process to develop and agree a five-year Play Strategy for County Louth within the lifetime of the Policy. This will:

- Establish the detailed baseline and sufficiency assessment
  - Municipal district (MD) mapping of current and planned provision (play spaces and facilities and programmes and initiatives)
  - Population and planning analysis; current and projected. Where are people and where will they be
- SCOT analysis
  - SMART Play Development Objectives (Thematic)
  - Thematic Action Plans:
    - Governance and Leadership
    - Understanding Need and Experience
    - Increasing Our Range of Play Spaces and Environments: Rural and Urban
    - Promoting Play and Play Practice
    - Communicating the Benefits of Play and How to Experience them in County Louth



# Appendix 1: The Case for Play and Play for All

This section of the Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 sets out the case for promoting, facilitating and providing spaces and environments for play for all ages across the County.

It draws on published studies and evidence to support the case that access to environments and opportunities to play benefit both the individual and wider society.

The Importance of Play is a report prepared by the University of Cambridge sought to confirm the evidence base to support the role of and justification for investment in play. It sets out that:

'Play is sometimes contrasted with work and characterised as a type of activity which is essentially unimportant, trivial and lacking in any serious purpose.....something which children do because they are immature and something they will grow out of when they become adults'

The report brings together sources of evidence and research and concludes that:

'Play in all its rich variety is one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. Indeed, without play, none of these achievements would have been possible. The value of play is increasingly recognised, by researchers and within the policy arena, for adults as well as children, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being'

There is now a wealth of research and evidence focused on the benefits of play which has been generated and validated for well over a century. Based on the growing body of evidence international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union have developed policies which support the right to play.

The case for play is set out against six areas below:



## Physical and cognitive health and wellbeing:

In general terms well-being is understood as the quality of people's lives. It is a dynamic state and can be impacted positively and negatively by the extent of the opportunities that people in any society must be playful...to engage in activities which can be defined as play regardless of age.

Physical play begins during the second year of life and can take the form of informal and creative activities right through formal games and sports with their own rules and specifications. The range of evidence and research focused on physical play confirms that it positively impacts on physical development, motor skills, co-ordination and strength and endurance. These are important physical benefits which support children to prepare for their more active lives (including work) and sustain adults' physical abilities as they progress to older life (maintaining mobility and avoiding life altering slips trips and falls).

There is clear evidence that play deprivation has a negative impact on people's cognitive and emotional health and well-being. A range of published evidence confirms that children's playfulness is an indication of their mental health and wellbeing. It supports them to create positive emotional bonds and regulate their emotions (especially as they develop as adults) help to develop the ability to identify and manage stress and form positive respectful relationships with others including others who are 'different' to themselves.

## Inclusion, social cohesion and loneliness:

Whilst people live in an increasingly digitally connected world that does not mean that people feel included and there is less likelihood of them experiencing loneliness. Research on play recognises that play can be an individual activity or engaged via a group or team activity (formal or informal).

A review of research on the benefits of play confirms that access to play opportunities, places and spaces (indoors and outdoors; urban and rural; built or natural) supports children and adults to interact with others outside any connections they make via school, work and family. This helps to support people to integrate in new communities when they move to them or to become a part of a community that they live in. This in turn counteracts the potential of them feeling excluded or living with loneliness.

## Learning about the environment and the world around you:

Research and evidence relating to play confirms that the child, teenager, young adult and adult live in environments which change and that part of the individual's ability to react and adapt to these changes result from the skills and attributes they have amassed from their engagement in play across their life.

Outdoor play in urban and natural/rural settings helps people (and especially children) to range and roam so that they learn about these environments. For many it leads to an appreciation of their natural environments and the impact of their decisions on them.

Play in urban settings (especially in urban streetscapes) brings an appreciation of how it functions and has developed.

**Developing confidence, self-esteem, respect, negotiation and socialisation skills:**

As a society we place significant emphasis on the development of vocational and technical skills. It is recognised that we also need to develop our 'soft skills' to support us in working and connecting with others and to integrate with society in a rewarding manner and in ways which respects differences.

A review of the current research and understanding of the benefits of play confirms that types of play (including symbolic play and pretense/socio-dramatic) play key roles in the development of personal self-esteem and those soft skills around negotiation, expression, working in teams/groups and communication. The evidence suggests that people who have and have had the opportunity to play tend to have the socialization skills which help them to work with and respect others.

**Building resilience, risk management, management and problem solving abilities:**

People will experience challenging situations and times in their lives which are not in line with their expectations and aspirations and will require some element of personal resilience to navigate them. Research and our current understanding of the benefits of play confirms that rewarding play experience helps build the abilities that will be required across everyone's lifetime. More specifically the range of types of play supports people to identify and manage risk and identify solutions to challenges and problems as people encounter them.

**Promoting a culture of innovation, creativity and personal development:**

All of the recognised forms of play support the individual and groups of people to be creative and to innovate. These are skills and traits which help the young person to transition as an adult and bring with them the ability to innovate and create; this can impact positively on problem solving, expression, managing change and overcoming obstacles and delivering on opportunities in their careers and in their communities. Most forms of play support the participant to stretch what they can do; this is particularly the case in play which is risky or physical or has an element of competition (games outdoor and indoor and online). This creates the conditions to develop personal skills.

# Appendix 2: Complementing and Contributing to National and Local Policies and Strategies

In developing the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy alignment was sought with key strategic local objectives.

The Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 exists in a policy and strategy landscape which includes a range of national and county wide policy and strategy. Appendix 2 confirms how the Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 complements and 'works with' them.

## National Development Plan 2021-2030

The National Development Plan 2018-2027 is a multi-sectoral strategy, published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, serving as a strategic roadmap for infrastructure investment and development over a ten-year period. The plan outlines investment priorities that will guide national, regional, and local planning and decision-making over the next two decades. This ambitious plan aims to drive Ireland's long term economic, environmental and social progress across all parts of the country. Key priorities of the National Development Plan include:

- Strengthening rural economies and communities
- Promoting sustainable mobility
- Improving access to quality childcare, education and health services

The Louth County Council Play Policy closely aligns these goals with a particular emphasis on social progress. The National Development Plan sets enhancing facilities throughout Ireland as a strategic investment priority and sets specific goals focused on the improvement of access to services and strengthening communities, the growth of play opportunities in Louth will support progress towards this goal. From the perspective of play this means investing in urban and rural/natural and built environments to facilitate play and play provision.

## Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future

The 2025 Programme for Government (PfG), Securing Ireland's Future, presents a vision for economic stability, infrastructural development, and administrative efficiency. It includes a commitment:

- To encourage and promote physical activity participation levels including children of all abilities, people with disabilities and older people
- Prioritising the development of education halls and sporting facilities including play areas

The Louth County Council Play Policy supports the aims and objectives of the Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future by promoting inclusive and accessible play and physical activity opportunities and environments for both younger and older people as well as people with disabilities across County Louth (urban and rural).

## Project Ireland 2040 (National Planning Framework)

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is the Government's high level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of Ireland to the year 2040. The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy will contribute to the national strategy outcomes including:

- Compact growth – To create more attractive places in which people can live and work and the Play Policy will seek to create the conditions to provide play environments in urban and rural areas
- Strengthened rural economies and communities – These focuses on the key role that rural areas play in defining a region's identity and in driving the local economy through a high-quality environment and use of natural resources.
- Access to Quality Childcare, Education and Health Services – The Play Policy will develop opportunities for enhanced play provision.

## Ready, Steady, Play! – A National Play Policy

The National Play Policy provides a framework for future development and sets out a range of challenges to developing a partnership approach between all key stakeholders. The policy delves into the importance of play and to maximise play opportunities, also looking at safety and co-design through the lens and voices of children. The National Play Policy framework includes:

- Guiding Principles
- A partnership approach between the statutory, community, voluntary and private sectors
- Developing a play infrastructure
- Safety and public liability insurance
- Funding arrangements

Louth County Council's Play Policy aligns with the National Play Policy by supporting the development of safe, inclusive, and well-designed play infrastructure, providing more play opportunities for the County Louth population and addressing the barriers and challenges to play across the County. It will seek to create the conditions to deliver the National Play Policy in Co Louth including partnership working, co-design and ensuring that the voice of children and young people and adults influence all key decisions relating to the provision of play infrastructure and play opportunities.

## Get Ireland Active! National Physical Activity Plan

The National Physical Activity Plan aims to increase physical activity levels across the entire population, thereby improving the health and wellbeing of people living in Ireland. Its goal is to create a society that facilitates, promotes and supports physical activity, encouraging an active lifestyle with less time spent being sedentary.

The plan focuses on creating increased opportunities for people to be active as part of their everyday lives, removing barriers to participation, enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation at a national, local and community levels, and fostering a supportive environment where physical activity becomes normal. The plan also promotes best practices and explores new models of participation to engage more people in physical activity.

The overarching target of the Plan is to increase the proportion of the population undertaking regular physical activity by 1% per annum, with the aim being that Irish people will better understand physical activity's health benefits and learn how to be more active in their daily lives.

The Louth County Council Play Policy aligns with the guiding principles of the National Physical Activity Plan Play Policy particularly providing adventurous and innovative play opportunities therefore supporting increased participation in physical activity across all ages and abilities.

## Embracing Ireland's Outdoors – National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027

Embracing Ireland's Outdoors is a national, cross-Government, stakeholder-led strategy that guides and supports the sustainable development and management of the outdoor for recreation. Its goal is to increase participation in outdoor recreation to realise the associated social, health and economic benefits. The strategy focuses on strengthening leadership at both national and county levels to ensure a more coordinated approach and effective use of resources.

A key priority of the strategy is to encourage greater participation, particularly among young people and underrepresented groups, while also enhancing and protecting access to the outdoors for the benefit of all. Additionally, it aims to improve the knowledge, skills, and expertise of stakeholders and partners involved in outdoor recreation. Beyond these objectives, the strategy supports broader

national goals such as rural development, climate action, and economic growth, while recognising the role of agriculture and tourism.

The Louth County Council Play Policy aligns with the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy by promoting play opportunities in the County's outdoor spaces. Furthermore, by supporting the sustainable use of Louth's natural and built environments, the Play Policy encourages greater participation in outdoor activity, particularly among young and older people, as well as underrepresented groups.

## National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028

The central aim of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028 is to provide a platform to realise the rights of children and young people in Ireland, so that all partners can work effectively together to ensure children and young people can thrive. The following vision was established for the National Policy Framework, "An Ireland which fully respects and realises the rights of children and young people". The Framework established five National outcomes:

- Active and Healthy
- Achieving in Learning and Development
- Safe and Protected from Harm
- Economic Security and Opportunity
- Connected, Respected, and Contributing to their World

The Louth County Council Play Policy aligns with the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028 by supporting and encouraging increased participants in play and the provision of safe environments for children and young people to play, explore and learn.

## National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030

This Strategy sets out a whole-of-Government approach to disability setting out the following vision "To ensure full participation in Irish society on an equal basis with others, disabled people have a right to a life without barriers". Individual Government Departments and State Agencies are responsible for planning and delivering the commitments that come under their remit across the five key Pillars set out in the strategy:

- Inclusive Learning and Education
- Employment
- Independent Living and Active Participation in Society
- Health and Wellbeing
- Transport and Mobility

The strategy aims to increase participation and opportunities for disabled people in all aspects of life. The Louth County Council Play Policy complements and contributes to it promoting inclusive, accessible play environments that removes the barriers and challenges and support full participation and inclusion.

## Healthy Ireland

Healthy Ireland is a national framework for action aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of the population of Ireland for future generations. The framework is based on an understanding of the factors that influence health and wellbeing, and is designed to drive real, measurable change. Healthy Ireland takes a "whole of government" and "whole of society" approach to tackling the issues which lead to negative health outcomes.

The Framework offers six priority areas of work, two of which offer clear synergy with the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy:

- Physical activity
  - Spaces and places for health and wellbeing
- Therefore, the Louth County Council Play Policy will help create the conditions to deliver on these two Healthy Ireland priorities.

## Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly: Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy 2019 – 2031

The primary objective of the Strategy is to support the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and the economic and climate policies of the Government by providing a long-term strategic planning and economic framework for the Region. The strategy sets out the following vision for the region: "To create a sustainable and competitive Region that supports the health and wellbeing of our people and places, from urban to rural, with access to quality housing, travel and employment opportunities for all". The strategy makes a commitment to:

- Support play policies to address the play and recreation needs of children and young people and ensure the integration of play provision and child-friendly neighbourhoods
- The continued provision and enhancement of facilities and amenities for children and young people, such as childcare, schools, playgrounds, parks and sports grounds, is a priority and will continue to be for the foreseeable future

The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy aligns with the regional strategy by ensuring the integration of play provision and prioritising opportunities and enhancement of play facilities in County Louth.



## County Louth Local Economic and Community Plan 2024-2029

The LECP sets out the framework, objectives and actions to promote Louth's economic and local/community development over a six-year period. The LECP is a collaborative approach representing community and economic elements and the needs of its citizens. The plan includes the following high-level goals:

- To work with all communities to help them reach their full economic and social potential
- To develop entrepreneurship and the economic opportunities afforded by the County's strategic location
- To foster healthy, inclusive, diverse and creative and resilient neighbourhoods
- To actively lead on the county's climate resilience, sustainability and biodiversity and will have engaged, empowered, dynamic, resourced and connected communities

The ambition for Louth is to create accessible economic and social opportunities which will positively act on its population to thrive in a vibrant, welcoming community. This aligns with the Play Policy's guiding principles and outcomes. Play will help contribution to the goals relating to health, diversity and resilient communities.

## Louth County Development Plan 2021 – 2027

The Louth County Development Plan is the key strategic document guiding growth, housing, economy and the environment. It addresses the physical, economic, social, and environmental needs of the community by supporting structured development, protecting the environment, and enhancing valued assets and amenities.

The plan contains specific Local Area Plans for each of the municipal areas as well as rural needs. Chapter 2 Core and Settlement promotes future growth and high-quality living and working environments. Chapter 4 Social & Community improving the development of healthy, sustainable, inclusive communities delivering a wide range of community social, educational recreational and cultural facilities being accessible and inclusive. Chapter 8 'Natural Heritage Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure recognises the potential for sustainable green infrastructure development within the County. The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy contributes through a shared goal of supporting the provision of high quality and accessible play facilities, improving the quality of life and wellbeing of the County Louth population.

## Louth County Council Corporate Plan 2024-2029

The Louth County Council Corporate Plan outlines the council's strategic vision is "to lead the way in sustainability, inclusivity and quality of life for its citizens". The 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy aligns with the following objectives set out in the Corporate Plan:

- Strengthen communities through empowerment and inclusion
- Tackling climate change and promoting sustainability
- Delivering on key infrastructure
- Delivering Louth's place in Project Ireland 2040  
The Council's Corporate Plan establishes the six core values which will guide how it operates as a corporate body.

The guiding principles in the Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 align with them as follows:

1. **Citizen Centric:** The Play Policy commitment to the Meaningful Public Engagement principle ensures that decisions made regarding play investment and provision place the citizens of the County at the core of the processes which lead to play related decisions
2. **Innovate:** The Play Policy Adventurous and Innovative Play Opportunities principle commits to encouraging innovation in the development of places to play and the provision of play opportunities. This fully aligns to the Innovate Corporate Value
3. **Governance:** The Play Policy principle Promoting Collaborative Planning and Delivery of Play Opportunities (across the Council's Departments and with external organisations) ensures that the Play Policy benefits from the governance systems and processes which underpin the Council's work as a corporate body and also align with the Governance value adopted by the Council as one of its corporate values

4. **Sustainability:** The Play Policy principle Sustainable Management and Development of Play Provision ensures that the Play Policy is aligned with the Council's corporate values. The corporate value is further embedded in the Play Policy through its Optimising Our Built and Natural Environments as Places to Play; this Play Policy principle commits to 'Liaise with the Outdoor Recreation Officer to create opportunities to play in the County's natural environments which respect their habitats and biodiversity'
5. **Equality and Inclusiveness:** The Play Policy principle promoting Accessibility to Play Opportunities seeks to make play spaces and opportunities accessible for all of the County's citizens. This ensures that the Play Policy is consistent with the Corporate Plan's Equality and Inclusiveness corporate value
6. **Democratic:** The Play Policy principle to embed Evidence Based Decision Making combined with the Commitment to Meaningful Public Engagement ensure that the decisions relating to play spaces, facilities and programmes are done on an objective and non-bias basis and therefore are democratic. These two Play Policy principles ensure that the Play Policy is fully aligned with this corporate value

The Play Policy will contribute to all four of these objectives improving access, inclusion and well-being, whilst continuing to develop and increase play opportunities and provision throughout County Louth.

## County Louth Age Friendly Strategy 2026-2031

The County Louth Age Friendly Strategy has a focus on ensuring public spaces across the county are safe, accessible, well maintained appropriately designed to support access and use by older people. It aims to enhance quality of life by supporting older people's health and wellbeing, and to increase their participation in community life in every town and village. The County Louth Play Policy 2026-2031 aligns with the following Age Friendly County Themes:

- Outdoor Spaces and Buildings
- Respect and Social Inclusion
- Social Participation
- Community Support and Health Services  
The Play Policy aligns with these themes by recognising play as a lifelong activity and by supporting inclusive, accessible public spaces that encourage social participation, wellbeing, and intergenerational engagement for both younger and older people.

## Louth Local Sports Plan 2026-2031

The County Louth Local Sports Plan 2026-2031 sets out its approach to increasing participation in sport and physical activity to enable 'Everyone to be Active Everywhere' and for County Louth to become a place where being active is part of everyday life. The plan's mission is:

"To build healthy, active and connected communities by working collaboratively, being inclusive, prioritising sustainability, empowering communities, being innovative and having a joined-up approach to evidence-based decision-making".

Through a focus on promoting physical activity as part of everyday life and providing inclusive, accessible environments that provide play and physical activities for all ages the Play Policy complements the Sports Plan's mission healthy, active and connected communities and to enable everyone to be active everywhere.

## Louth Outdoor Recreation Plan 2026-2031

The County Louth Outdoor Recreation Plan 2026-2031 sets out its approach to increasing participation in outdoor recreation activity where everyone can enjoy safe, accessible and sustainable outdoor recreation.

The plan sets out its mission: "To work in partnership to develop, manage, and promote inclusive outdoor recreation opportunities across County Louth, supporting participation for all ages and abilities while protecting and enhancing the county's natural and recreational assets".

Through a focus on promoting participation and providing inclusive, accessible environments that provide play and physical activities for all ages the Play Policy aligns with the Outdoor Recreation Plan.

# Appendix 3: Play Opportunities for Teenagers and Adults

This appendix to the Louth County Council Play Policy 2026-2031 sets out the play opportunities for teenagers and adults that are distinct from sport or outdoor activity including examples of different forms of play that teenagers and adults may engage in.

While play is most associated as something that belongs in childhood, the 2026-2031 Louth County Council Play Policy recognises that play is an important part of life for both teenagers and adults. A growing body of research in psychology, neuroscience and education indicates that play remains crucial throughout adulthood.

Play typically involves activities done for enjoyment rather than for practical purposes. It's undertaken voluntarily, often with an attitude of curiosity, creativity, or spontaneity. While children's play is usually physical or imaginative, adult play often includes playful banter, informal games, artistic hobbies, role-playing games or even comedic interactions.

Play opportunities for teenagers and adults offers numerous benefits that contribute to overall wellbeing and character. Examples of key benefits of play in these age groups include:

- Stress Reduction – Playful activities can help older age groups cope with stress by promoting relaxation and reducing cortisol levels
- Cognitive Development – Play can improve mental sharpness, promote creativity, and improve problem-solving skills. It also enhances flexibility and memory, which are crucial for learning and development

- Social Connections – Play fosters empathy, trust and intimacy in relationships, helping to build a supportive network that aids in stress management and mitigates feelings of social isolation and loneliness
- Emotional Well-being – Play can help adults and teenagers build emotional resilience by providing a space to reset and step outside pressure and performance supporting stress regulation and emotional balance

For teenagers and adults, play often takes different forms and may occur in informal, social or creative settings rather than through structured sports or organised recreation activities. These forms of play contribute to positive mental health, social interaction and the development of inclusive and vibrant public spaces.

Examples of play opportunities for teenagers and adults may include:

### Social Play

- Board games, card games and tabletop gaming
- Digital and interactive gaming in social settings
- Community games events or playful social gatherings
- Role playing and improv groups

### Creative and Cultural Play

- Music, dance and performance-based activities
- Public art, street art and collaborative creative projects
- Makerspaces, craft activities and creative workshops

### Playful Public Realm

- Interactive installations and playful street furniture
- Playful urban design elements such as swings, climbing features or balance structures integrated into public spaces
- Public spaces designed to encourage exploration, curiosity and interaction

### Informal and Intergenerational Play

- Outdoor gathering spaces encouraging social interaction
- Community festivals and events that incorporate playful activities
- Shared play environments where teenagers, adults and children can participate together

Recognising and supporting these forms of play can help create lively, inclusive and engaging communities, ensuring that the benefits of play are accessible to people of all ages across County Louth.





Comhairle Contae **Lú**  
**Louth** County Council