

The Government's £18 Million Playground Fund: Opportunities and Challenges for Local Authorities

To: Councils in England
For info: Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales

1 Overview

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has published guidance for the new £18 million Playground Fund, which will provide non-competitive funding to 66 local authorities in England to create, improve or enhance playground provision in areas identified as having the greatest need. Each authority will receive £270,000 over 2026/27 and 2027/28, with an expectation that funding will support three playground projects and contribute to wider play sufficiency objectives.¹

The fund is explicitly targeted at communities experiencing higher levels of child deprivation and weaker playground provision. Site selection has been informed by factors including the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), the number of children per playground, playground size and travel distances to play provision.

Importantly, the guidance reflects many of the themes raised in [APSE's previous briefing on Play England's Freedom to Play](#) report. Play England argued that investment should move beyond simply replacing equipment and instead be rooted in the principle of play sufficiency, ensuring children have adequate access to quality and accessible opportunities to play across their communities.²

The Government guidance places strong emphasis on meaningful engagement with children, families and local communities. Councils are expected to involve users throughout site selection,

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/18-million-playground-fund/playground-fund-guidance-for-recipient-local-authorities>

² <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2025/25-36-play-england-ten-year-national-play-strategy/>

design and delivery and also demonstrate how playground improvements contribute to broader outcomes such as wellbeing and community connection.

The guidance also draws heavily upon evidence highlighted previously by Play England, including research from the University of Sheffield showing significant inequalities in playground provision and the emerging concept of a “double disadvantage”, where deprived communities often have the poorest access to play facilities.³

Whilst APSE welcomes this targeted investment, our recent [State of the Market for Parks and Greenspaces 2026 Survey](#) highlights the longer-term challenge facing councils. Although capital funding opportunities continue to emerge, many authorities remain under pressure from revenue budgets. The survey found that 57% of respondents expected reductions in revenue funding.⁴

This creates a dilemma for councils. Capital investment may successfully deliver new or refurbished play spaces but sustaining those assets through inspections and repairs remains difficult.

The Government guidance recognises this issue and specifically requires authorities to consider long-term maintenance and inspection arrangements from the outset. This is a welcome acknowledgement that creating a playground is only the beginning; maintaining safe, attractive and inclusive play spaces requires a sustained revenue commitment.

The fund also offers opportunities to align play provision with wider local authority priorities. APSE’s State of the Market Survey found growing recognition of parks as critical community infrastructure. Playgrounds should be viewed within this broader context rather than as standalone facilities. Investment that improves access to parks, enhances biodiversity, supports active travel and creates welcoming spaces for families can help maximise the wider social return on investment. This is particularly relevant given [APSE and Survation's 2026 polling](#), which found that 48% of residents visit local parks at least once a week and 48% rate their local parks service highly (8-10 out of 10), representing a 5% increase on the previous year.⁵ These findings suggest that parks and green spaces remain among the most widely used and valued local authority services.

³ <https://www.playengland.org.uk/newsblog/to-play-or-not-to-play-mapping-unequal-provision-of-childrens-playgrounds>

⁴ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2026/26-10-state-of-the-market-on-parks-and-greenspaces-2026/>

⁵ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2026/26-03-apse-and-survation-2026-annual-polling-of-councillors-and-the-public/>

2 APSE Comment

APSE welcomes the Playground Fund and its focus on deprivation and inclusion. The guidance reflects many of the recommendations advanced by Play England, particularly around play sufficiency and equitable access to quality play opportunities. The emphasis on engaging communities throughout project development is also timely. APSE and Survation polling found that only 46% of residents believe councils take account of views from all parts of the community, while 38% actively disagree that councils listen to all voices. Meaningful consultation around playground design and location therefore provides an opportunity not only to improve play provision but also to strengthen local trust and community ownership of public spaces.

However, APSE would urge councils and government alike to recognise that the success of the programme will depend not only on capital investment but also on the availability of long-term revenue funding. Without sustainable maintenance arrangements, the sector risks repeating a familiar cycle whereby new facilities are delivered but become increasingly difficult to maintain. The Playground Fund presents an important opportunity to improve children's access to play but its legacy will ultimately be determined by how well local authorities are supported to sustain these assets for future generations.

How can APSE help?

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Parks and Greenspace Network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider sports and leisure sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

2.1 Benchmarking for your parks and greenspace service

APSE Performance Networks members can access the [PIMS](#) (Play Inspection Management System) App, enabling playground inspections to be carried out electronically, supporting efficient asset management, maintenance planning and benchmarking of playground quality against other local authorities.

APSE Performance Networks is the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking organisation in the UK. With over 200 authorities in membership, Performance Networks assists local councils by:

- Demonstrating progression on carbon reduction/ecological actions
- Helping to set a clear baseline on which competitiveness, efficiency and value for money can be measured in a systematic manner.
- Identifying the impact of service changes and interventions for your own local authorities and for others.
- Assessing the quality, cost and competitiveness of the services that councils provide on a regular basis.
- Helping to report data in meaningful ways to both elected members and the public.
- Identifying direction of travel and pace of change with regard to service delivery.

- Identifying inefficiencies such as poor productivity and high cost.
- Supporting service improvement through process benchmarking and sharing best practice examples.

For more information about how your parks and greenspaces service can benefit from Performance Networks membership, click [here](#).

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APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

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- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
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