

## Audit Committee – 27 March 2026

### Open Spaces and Playground Safety Checks Update

Purpose	For Review
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>New Forest District Council is committed to providing an effective maintenance regime for its Playground and Play Equipment, in order to comply with statutory responsibilities and health and safety obligations.</p> <p>This paper outlines the agreed approach to resolution of remaining outstanding audit actions. This is largely achieved via the alignment of the management of playgrounds within NFDC open spaces areas, including the maintenance, inspection and asset repair of play areas, with the recently adopted <a href="#">Playground and Play Equipment Policy 2025</a>.</p> <p>This will ensure that all play areas and equipment provided by New Forest District Council are safe, inclusive, well maintained, and supportive of children's development encouraging wider community engagement.</p>
<b>Recommendation(s)</b>	<b>That the Audit Committee note the proposed approach to the management of NFDC Playgrounds by the Public Realm and Sustainability Service.</b>
Reasons for recommendation(s)	The proposed approach will support consistency of standards across all NFDC playgrounds, improving customer experience, standardising NFDC processes, clarifying corporate responsibilities and reducing risk liabilities, and enable overdue audit actions to be completed and the audit closed.
Ward(s)	All
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Geoff Blunden – Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability

Strategic Director(s)	Tracey Coleman - Strategic Director – Place, Operations and Sustainability
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## Introduction and background

1. NFDC maintain a number of children’s playgrounds across the New Forest District area – some managed by the NFDC Housing Landlord Service, others managed by the NFDC Public Realm and Sustainability Service.
2. In 2025, NFDC adopted the [Playground and Play Equipment Policy](#), developed by the Housing Landlord Service. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that all play areas and equipment provided by New Forest District Council are safe, inclusive, well maintained, and supportive of children's development encouraging wider community engagement.
3. To support consistency of standards across all NFDC playgrounds, it is proposed that both services operate in accordance with the 2025 policy. This would improve customer experience, standardise NFDC processes, clarify corporate responsibilities and reduce risk liabilities of playground sites.

## Playgrounds managed by the Grounds Maintenance Team

4. The following playgrounds are (or will be) managed (inspected, maintained and repaired) as Open Spaces assets by the Grounds Maintenance Team, within the Public Realm and Sustainability Service:

	Site	Location	W3W
1	Buckland Gardens Play	Lymington	impulsive.finishers.tight
2	Foxgloves Play	Bransgore	bespoke.once.slack
3	Greenwood Close Play	New Milton	onwards.green.eternally
4	Heatherstone Play	Sopley	slug.anchorman.bluffing
5	Heatherstone Trail	Sopley	hologram.spark.orbited
6	Nursery Close Play	Hordle	even.otherwise.pickles
7	Pinetops Close Play	Pennington	tech.sunblocks.nags
8	Torreyana Gardens Play	Pennington	birthdays.lingering.juggles
9	Lakeside Way North	Totton	headliner.disclose.stow

10	Woodway Road	Totton	fattening.inspector.chuckling
12	Lakeside Way South	Totton	luggage.alarm.overheat
Sites due to be transferred to NFDC Spring 2026			
13	Fieldhouse Way	Lymington	dragons.sprayer.reactions
14	Knight Gardens	Lymington	clicker.robe.retain
15	Caspars Way	Fordingbridge	validated.forever.media
16	Chard Lane	Ringwood	shrub.craft.popped
17	Yarrow Lane	Ringwood	earphones.pastels.captive
18	Hopclover Way	Ringwood	wage.fetches.bookcases

## Playground Audit

5. In 2023, an internal audit was carried out of NFDC Open Spaces Playgrounds. This audit recommended 12 Management Actions. 7 of these are now closed. Of the remaining actions, 2 are high priority and 3 are medium priority.
6. The adoption of the [Playground and Play Equipment Policy](#) by Housing Landlord Services in 2025 has provided an opportunity to address the audit actions by aligning to an adopted standard rather than creating a new policy just for the playgrounds in areas managed by the Public Realm and Sustainability team. The benefits of this approach include speed of implementation, avoidance of duplication of effort, and ensuing a consistent standard that doesn't conflict with the management procedures of other NFDC departments for similar assets. Support for this approach will enable overdue audit actions to be completed and the audit closed.
7. The two remaining high priority actions, along with details of how they are being closed, is shown in the table below.

Management Action	Resolution
1.1 Critically review assets and inspection timescales based on 'Risk and Likelihood' and formalise site and play equipment inspection schedule.	The Housing Landlord Policy sets standard schedules and procedures for undertaking routine visual, operational, main annual and bespoke inspections in housing playgrounds. These schedules and procedures have been adopted across open spaces playgrounds as standard.

<p>1.2 Open Spaces to draft a Playgrounds and Play Equipment Policy covering the sites and equipment where compliance responsibility rests with Open Spaces. The policy will set out the purpose, legal requirements, responsibilities, methodology, arrangements, and process, set out a review period frequency and append a schedule of sites and equipment. The policy is to be presented to EMT and consulted through safety panels.</p>	<p>The Open Spaces approach will align to the Housing Landlord Services policy, to prevent duplication or diverging approaches within the organisation.</p>
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8. To determine the required frequency of the “Operational” check, required every 1-3 months, there will be the annual undertaking of a risk assessment which will then inform the Operational Inspection schedule for each playground (i.e. 1, 2 or 3 monthly)
9. There will also be the following key differences between the Housing Landlord Services policy, and the approach taken by the Public Realm and Sustainability Team, as follows:
  - a. Service specific roles and responsibilities will be different for open spaces versus housing playgrounds
  - b. Procedures for the reporting of repairs and logging asset inspections will be different between the open spaces and housing services e.g. contact phone numbers/email, due to established processes, embedded software and pre-existing contracts
10. The three remaining medium priority actions, along with details of how they are being closed, is shown in the table below.

<b>Management Action</b>	<b>Resolution</b>
<p>2.1 The Assistant Director for Place and Operations to assign a lead Place and Operations Officer to undertake a fundamental review of the cross service arrangements where responsibility rests with Place and Operations. The review to consider compliance activities, roles, responsibilities, efficiencies, reporting and data collection, budgets, and compliance monitoring. The data gathered from the review will inform Observation 1, 1.2 and 1.2 Investigate Revisions</p>	<p>The alignment with the Housing Landlord Services policy will address immediate concerns regarding roles, responsibilities and monitoring.</p>

options regarding current Asset Inspection Criterion and IT Systems to track actions.	
3.1 Introduce Annual Reviews of Open Space Play Parks and Play Equipment Risk Assessments	Further to paragraph 8 above, this will be undertaken to determine inspection frequency, and reviewed annually.
5.1 Place and Operations to review the governance arrangements for health and safety compliance activities to provide oversight and assurance.	Reporting mechanisms will be developed so that compliance can be monitored and reported on in a timely manner.

### **Corporate plan priorities**

11. This proposal supports the following Corporate Plan Priorities:

- a. People Priority 2: Empowering our residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives – by providing access to high quality, safe playgrounds which encourage physical activity and social integration.
- b. Place Priority 3: Caring for our facilities, neighbourhoods and open spaces in a modern and responsive way – by taking a consistent and proactive approach to the management of all NFDC playgrounds, prioritising the health and safety of facilities.

### **Options appraisal**

12. The following options were considered in the development of this proposal:

- a. Create a new playground management policy specific to play areas in open spaces managed by NFDC Grounds Maintenance Team. This would likely conflict with the procedures and standards recently approved for housing playgrounds, creating mixed expectations for residents and visitors and potentially creating confusion over corporate liability.
- b. Align as closely as possible with the recently approved [Playground and Play Equipment Policy](#) to support consistency of standards across all NFDC playgrounds, improving customer experience, standardising NFDC processes, clarifying corporate responsibilities and reducing risk liabilities.

13. Option b. offers a wide range of benefits and reduces corporate risks for NFDC and is therefore the recommended approach.

### **Consultation undertaken**

14. Colleagues across multiple NFDC services have been consulted in the development of this proposal, including those in Housing, Planning, Transformation and Audit. Subject to approval of the approach, further consultation will be carried out in the detailed implementation of this proposal.

### **Financial and resource implications**

15. There are no direct financial or resource implications arising from this proposal. The approach put forward seeks to reduce duplication of effort, align corporate procedures and improve the quality and longevity of corporate assets.

### **Legal implications**

16. The proposed approach seeks to reduce corporate liability and clarify legal responsibilities in relation to the management of NFDC playgrounds. Further consultation with Legal may be needed in the event that inspections schedules are varied following risk assessment.

### **Risk assessment**

17. Risks associated with the approach are minimal but include the operational and legal risk of running slightly different processes between NFDC services (as outlined in paragraph 23).

### **Environmental / Climate and nature implications**

18. Improving the inspection, maintenance and repair procedures of playgrounds in NFDC open spaces should improve asset condition, increasing equipment longevity and reducing material wastage/replacement.

### **Equalities implications**

19. Standardising the NFDC approach to playground management across housing and open spaces sites will support access to high quality play areas across the district and encourage inclusion in physical activity, regardless of which service area manages the site. The recommended approach will bring consistency of safety and quality of play areas, regardless of geographical location.

## **Crime and disorder implications**

20. Improving the condition and inspection schedule of playgrounds could have a positive impact on the look and feel of sites, encouraging increased footfall and helping to reduce antisocial behaviour.

## **Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications**

21. No data protection/information governance or ICT implications arising from the recommendations due to no personal data being collected and no changes to existing software/hardware.

## **New Forest National Park / Cranborne Chase National Landscape implications**

22. Improving the quality and safety of playgrounds in NFDC open spaces will positively impact the objectives of the New Forest National Park and Cranborne Chase National Landscape by encouraging recreation in specifically designed playgrounds rather than potentially in protected habitats. High quality playgrounds could increase visitor numbers, stay duration and economic activity, supporting communities and increasing appreciation for the local area.

## **Conclusion**

23. The standardisation of management of playgrounds in NFDC open spaces supports consistency of standards across housing and open spaces play sites. The recommendations seek to reduce duplication of effort and reduce corporate risk, providing overall benefit for the residents and visitors of the New Forest District.
24. The Public Realm and Sustainability Service will work to embed the procedures outlined.
25. This will enable internal audit actions to be completed and closed.

## **Appendices:**

None

## **Background Papers:**

[Playground and Play Equipment Policy 2025](#)