CYP Now investigation shows the extent of cuts to local play facilities, budgets and staff, as local authorities and campaigners blame a massive drop in government support over the past three years.

Outdoor play under threat from local facilities and funding cuts

**PLAY INVESTIGATION**

By Gabriella Józwiak

A huge cut in spending on play facilities by councils over the past four years has led to closure of playgrounds, lowering of standards and loss of staff, according to a new investigation.

Responses to a Freedom of Information (FoI) request submitted to all local authorities revealed that more than one in three councils have removed some staffed play provision since 2010.

The findings show that the cuts in facilities have been the result of a 38 per cent fall in councils’ overall spending on play between 2010 and 2013 amounting to £26.6m among councils that responded. This has been largely driven by a halving of councils’ capital budgets from £381m in 2010/11 to £198m in 2013/14.

Capital budgets alone have fallen by an average 69 per cent, but almost a fifth of areas report a 90 per cent reduction. Responses collected from 157 councils responsible for play in England – a combination of county, borough, city, town and district councils – show that on average 2.4 per cent of an area’s total play provision has been lost. However, this masks huge local variations. For example, Sunderland City Council has closed 10 unstaffed playgrounds, representing about 12 per cent of its overall provision.

**THE OVERALL PICTURE OF PLAY FUNDING CUTS**

Overall spending on play by councils

2010/11: £679.9m

2013/14: £41.5m

**DROP:** 98.6 per cent

**Revenues spending (51 councils provided data)**

- 30 councils had a rise

- 20 councils had the same

- 36 councils had a fall

- 15 per cent of a council’s overall spending

**Maintenance spending (31 councils provided data)**

- 27 councils had a rise

- 10 had the same

- 4 had a fall

**Capital spending (19 councils provided data)**

- 26 had a rise

- 9 had the same

- 7 had a fall

**Staffed facilities closures (34 councils provided data)**

- 24 per cent had closed unstaffed play facilities

- 22 per cent had closed staffed play facilities

**CASE STUDY: ISLINGTON BUYS INTO LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY FOR CHILDREN**

The London Borough of Islington has bucked the trend of staffed play closures by keeping all 12 of its adventure playgrounds open and investing £600,000 of government cuts since 2010. Its children live in the most densely populated borough in England, with the second smallest amount of open space per resident in the country. The playgrounds offer them opportunities to take risks, play freely and experience nature under the guidance of professional play workers.

An Islington Council spokesperson explains: “Islington councils had a strong partnership with the local voluntary and community sector in relation to the delivery of adventure play for many years. Following a large-scale review of its approach to adventure play in 2010/11, an agreement was reached whereby the council would continue to manage six of the 12 sites for a fixed period, while the six sites were taken over at that time by individual small local community groups, who would have to meet all cost of running the projects.

The project was led by Play England in partnership with Splash Projects to provide funding towards play through its £150m Our Children’s Play programme. Between 2006 and 2012, Big Lottery Fund had offered £123m of play funding through its Playbuilder and Play Pathfinder programmes. An Islington council spokesman explains: “Islington council has had a long-term commitment to adventure play sites for a contract period of up to three years. As well as maintaining the annual revenue for adventure play, the council has made significant investments in infrastructure and facilities. All 12 adventure playgrounds have been protected for children’s play in perpetuity. In addition, the council entered into a partnership with Royal Bank of Scotland and Splash Projects to provide more than £600,000 worth of new and improved adventure playgrounds across the 12 adventure playgrounds.”

Islington Council has invested £600,000 in improving its 12 adventure playgrounds, including refurbishment of 12 adventure playgrounds, and all 12 are now open, despite facing £100m of government cuts since 2010.

**HOW THE SPENDING CUTS IMPACT ON COUNCIL PLAY BUDGETS**

Capital spending (19 councils provided data)

Largest Fall

Bradford: £179,433

Durham: £91,000

Poole: £850,000

Revenue spending (31 councils provided data)

Maintenance spending (31 councils provided data)

Largest Fall

£13,000 was the average reduction in councils that cut spending

£198,000 was the average reduction in councils that cut staffed facilities

27 councils showed a fall between 2010/11 and 2013/14

12 councils showed a rise

15 per cent of a council’s overall spending

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Impact on council play budgets
adventure playground through “school bookings, private parties, sale of food, rent of space, dedicated fundraising through its friends group and corporate sponsorship.”

Unsurprisingly, considering the number of staffed playground closures, 22 per cent of councils said they now employed fewer play staff compared to 2010. In addition, one in five said they had not hired any new playworkers since 2010.

Prisk suggests figures that show a decline in play staff tell only part of the story. “We don’t see the play leads in senior roles co-ordinating what’s happening in an area anymore,” she says. “One of the big successes of the previous government was having local authority staff in place who brought knowledge, early years and childcare services together.”

FoI responses showed budgets for play provision are declining across revenue, capital and maintenance funding streams. Of 119 councils that provided data on capital expenditure, 59 per cent experienced a fall in capital budget. The average fall in capital spending between 2010/11 and 2013/14 is more than £360,000, or 18 per cent drop. However, Bradford Metropolitan District Council reported the biggest fall over the three years of £1.2m, and 12 per cent of respondents said they had no capital budget for 2013/14 at all.

Although 34 per cent of councils said they had higher capital budgets in 2013/14 than in 2010/11, the average increase was £82,200, meaning average reductions in capital expenditure amounted to a reduction of about a fifth of revenue.

A fifth of respondents had higher revenue budgets for 2013/14 than in the previous year. However, the average budget rise was much lower at 5.4 per cent than the average cut. A fifth of councils also reported having no revenue budget at all for 2013/14, suggesting they were expecting to run in the absolute black. Maintenance budgets showed the least change over the four years. Landlords (4.6 per cent) reported a fall in maintenance budgets to make play areas or play services that were better maintained. However, some councils reported much deeper cuts. For example, Derby, Staffordshire County Council and Newcastle City Council had staffed play budgets falling by 60 per cent, or £1.2m in its revenue budget this year financial year than in 2010/11 – a 91 per cent reduction.

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