



# Design guidance for play spaces

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# Introduction

This short guidance note sets out principles for developing play spaces on Forestry Commission land. Key elements of this process are forming a multi-disciplinary team and considering the needs of people who will use the space. Our aim is to create naturalistic play spaces that act as a springboard for children's engagement with forests and woodlands as a whole. They should encourage children to explore the natural environment and to take part in active play where they have the opportunity to create their own play environments and activities.

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# Design Process

The design and construction of play areas requires considerable thought and care over siting, consultation with user groups (including children), design, the selection of a suitable contractor and suppliers, and construction and safety. Auditing and maintenance is required to ensure that all the relevant structural and safety protocols are met and that the play provided is sufficiently stimulating and relevant.

## Project Team:

- Good design is difficult to accomplish without establishing a project team that may include the following people (depending on the scale of the scheme)
  - Landscape Architect
  - Civil Engineer
  - Forester / District Forester
  - Recreation Manager / Recreation Ranger
  - Consultants
  - Artist / Sculptor
  - Children / Parents / Carers

## Process:

1. **Form project team**
  - All parties must understand how their contribution fits in
2. **Scope project**
  - Consultation
  - Research
  - Analysis
3. **Project plan**
  - Time line
  - Create a brief
4. **Design phase**
  - Design
  - Tender
  - Construction
  - Sign off job
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation**
  - How is the place space used
  - Accident levels
  - Can it be improved

# Play Spaces



Stirling Council play space

The thing that makes Forestry Commission play provision different from other providers is that the sites are generally perceived as natural, wild and extensive. These characteristics should therefore be reflected in the provision of play facilities.

## Design:

- Play areas must be designed and constructed in response to the needs of users, this includes parents and carers.
- Identify the unique interesting characteristics of the locality, the woodland site and the play location (which may relate to its geography, geology, history or natural history) and incorporate elements of these features in the play theme.
- Play areas should be seen as a springboard or way of encouraging people to explore the forest as a play environment.
- Identify and use existing features rather than clear everything away to start with a blank site.
- Use natural materials & water:
  - Structures should, wherever possible be made of timber.
  - Use bark, sand and pea gravel safety surfaces (See safety surfaces overleaf).
  - Use peeled logs (preferably a durable timber like oak), tree stumps and boulders as informal play structures or to provide interesting seating.

- Loose materials are valuable play materials and should be included rather than cleared away (sand, bark, branches, brash, cones, leaves).
- Avoid urbanisation by minimising use of plastic or powder coated steel.
- Do not fall into the trap of going immediately to a supplier or catalogue.
- Use or manufacture landform to create interesting topography or a sense of enclosure.
- Play areas should wherever possible include space for creative play, e.g. space to build dens.
- Play should challenge children and allow for an element of risk.

## Design Principles

### Location

- The location of play space needs careful consideration. Locating spaces too near visitors' centres and/or car parks can encourage visitors to spend all their time in one place and reduce their engagement with the rest of the forest. But locating spaces, especially those for younger children, too far from amenities will not be popular with users and may lead to low levels of use.
- The ideal may be to create a number of spaces, including those suitable for younger children located close to amenities and those suitable for a broader age range located further away.

### Consultation:

- Wherever possible consultation should be carried out on the play area development.
- Consultation should have an element of involvement in construction, e.g. workshops with an artist.

### Access:

- The access needs of all users should be considered. Usually clever design can allow access for most disabilities, but it is not expected that every component of every environment is fully accessible to all. However, there should always be some provision made for people with differing abilities.
- Careful selection of dual use equipment, the use of ramps, ropes for pulling and double slides will provide equipment with play value for children with a wide range of abilities.

### Safety Surfaces:

- Safety surfaces are intended to prevent serious accidents and head injuries and are only needed where there is movement or danger of fall. Obviously not including moving parts or fall negates the need for a safety surface.
- Bark, sand and pea gravel should be used rather than rubber matting.
- Rubber mesh matting with grass is only acceptable on a low-use site with a good grass sward.

### Landform:

- Earth banks and mounds are ideal for climbing, sliding and hiding games.
- Topography can allow play structures to sit well in the landscape and reduce or remove the need for safety surfacing.



Children give their views at Moors Valley



Landform



Vegetation Management

### Vegetation Management:

- Vegetation should be retained and managed to create a 'wild' environment, this will usually entail managing vegetation less frequently say 2 or 3 times in the year. Deliberately creating enclosure by vegetation management should not immediately be regarded as a risk for anti-social behaviour.
- Vegetation can also be used very effectively in the creation of the play elements (woven willow structures, planted 'dens', fruit trees and bushes, mazes, hiding games etc.).

### Natural Features:

- The play area / forest boundary should generally be blurred to enable children to gradually extend their range as they become familiar and comfortable with the site.
- Any existing natural feature on the site that could be used for play should be incorporated into the play space rather than removed.
- Sand is a valuable therapeutic play tool.

### Water & Mud:

- Water is a valuable play environment and should be incorporated safely wherever possible. Small pools, puddles and muddy areas will be used by children for play.
- Running water should be considered if possible.



Water &amp; Mud

### Open space:

- If possible site the space near existing grassed open space, or create open space near the play space, to allow for informal sport and ball games and other activities that need an expanse of open space.

### Fencing & Seating:

- Do not use fencing unless there is a genuine danger (e.g. a road). Instead use mounding, and vegetation to create a sense of enclosure. Any fencing should be designed to suit the location; natural materials should be considered e.g. hurdles.
- Play areas should include seating for children and young people, which could also double as play equipment.
- Seating should also be provided for adults inside the play environment rather than outside to encourage parents to engage in their children's play.



Fencing &amp; Seating

### Signage:

- Signage should be kept to a minimum, should first be welcoming and encourage people to use the site and equipment, and should be designed in as part of the play environment.

### Regulations / Guidance:

- The normal procedures for built structures should apply. Construction Design & Management (CDM) regulations, sustainable procurement (e.g. FSC certified timber) and timber treatment guidelines (not CCA).
- European play standards (EN1176 & EN1177), should be considered.
- Fall heights should meet the current standards.
- Disability Discrimination Act requires us to make play spaces accessible to as many children as possible.



Signage

# Elements of play

When designing a place space it is important to consider the sort of challenge and activity that children may want to take part in. Some elements of play activity are listed below and where possible should be included in any play space.

## Activities

- Construction and destruction (eg dens, dams)
- Creative play with sand, mud and other loose materials
- Physical games and informal sport (chase games, hide-and-seek, ball games, throwing/catching games)
- Exploring nature and the elements
- Social interaction or 'hanging out'
- Locomotor play, including:
  - Balancing
  - Swinging
  - Sliding
  - Climbing
  - Hiding
  - Challenge

# Existing play structures

Many sites have existing play equipment and structures that visitors value, for the play opportunities they offer and for their familiarity. Careful thought should be given before they are removed, as their disappearance may be seen in a negative light.

Visitor centre sites in particular often make use of specially-commissioned timber play sculptures built by Andy Frost on a nature theme: Rosliston's owl, Grizedale's vast lizard, Alice Holt's Woodpecker tree, the play trail at Moors Valley. These often striking constructions have an iconic quality that helps give sites an identity, and they clearly act as a big draw for both adults and children.

These bespoke structures are thus a valuable component of sites. But on their own they are unlikely to be the best way to deliver the kind of play opportunities the Forestry Commission should be aiming for. They are comparatively high-maintenance and not without their construction problems. Though not expensive compared to some conventional fixed equipment, they nonetheless represent a significant capital investment. Perhaps more importantly, they can work against the aim of engaging children with the woodlands in which they are placed, as they tend to offer a fairly narrow range of physical play activities that rarely make the most of the richness and variety of woodland settings. In some cases, such as the tree stump/viewing platforms at Wyre Forest and Alice Holt, they can become victims of their own charismatic appeal as in busy times children queue for long periods for the brief experience of climbing to the top.



Andy Frost's play structures are iconic but self-contained

There is a place for the spectacular in the Forestry Commission's play spaces, but it is best used with moderation and as a part of a much broader mix that is grounded in the vision of the woodland itself as the ultimate play space. There may be scope for 'decommissioning' some structures as usable play equipment at the end of their useful life, while keeping them as visual signifiers of the site, perhaps moved to another location. It may even be worth thinking about knocking some structures down and leaving them to decay slowly but visibly in an appropriate location not too far from their original spot: a reminder and memorial for past users and, over time, a powerful demonstration of the natural forces at work in woodland settings. As Grizedale's experience shows (Growing Adventure report, Tim Gill/ Forestry Commission 2006 Section 2) what replaces such structures is as important a question as what happens to them. In both cases, some kind of public input would be very valuable to generate ideas and test proposals.



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## Contacts

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For more information on this guidance note go to:  
[www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play)

For more information on the Forestry Commission look up [www.forestry.gov.uk/england](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england)