

# Expenditure by English Local Authorities in 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12:

including on Children's Play and Youth Services



## METHOD

This Survey was undertaken through the medium of a Freedom of Information Enquiry to 354 Principal Local Authorities in England. The initial survey was sent during early 2011, further reminders were sent subsequently. The initial request was by email to either the freedom of information email address where this could be found, or to a general email address. The questionnaire was accessed by a link to a Google Docs spreadsheet. We found that a proportion of these were returned as undelivered, some others told us they were unable to open the request due to council IT protocols - we had to send a version as an Excel document by email to these. We did not use postal delivery because of cost. The format chosen also enabled much easier collection of responses. It's worth noting that the majority of Councils were happy to respond by the original method and others using the excel sheet, but one or two refused citing legal grounds that the format was not allowed

in statute. We also recognised the statutory limit of 18 hours of work, or £400 in cost. Again one or two Councils declined to answer on this basis of cost, though we were happy if they completed as far as possible.

'Principal Council' means a top-tier local authority in England - this includes London Boroughs and other unitary authorities as well as two-tier areas with both County and District Councils.

In the end some 217 Councils responded and this Report is based on their responses. Thus, 137 Councils have failed to respond, and Fair Play feels this is not at all satisfactory in terms of their duty to obey the law. Whilst further attempts may be made to obtain the full data, we also are considering complaint channels internally or via the Information Commissioner.

This Report is thus at an interim stage but is published at this time to give a picture as to what is known thus far. Further work is in progress because some responses referred us to existing documents in the public domain though it has to be said that some of this is in formats and detail that would make it difficult to unravel and to present in the format of our enquiry, and would entail a great deal of work by a volunteer team. Council officers perhaps need to consider that what is standard understanding for them may not be so for many people. However, what we do have seems to us to be an important and useful set of data. The analysis we have undertaken is quite broad, and more detail can be extracted - access to the database will be enabled once we are confident that all possible entries have been secured.

An observation - a former Prime Minister has gone on record as regretting the freedom of information legislation introduced in his tenure of office. Readers may judge whether the data here is a legitimate use of this legislation and a proper use of local authority resources. In our view, transparency by such public bodies is key in a democratic society, the questions asked wholly legitimate and the answers obtained proof of the importance of an independent third sector, both as concerns the information obtained and as the fact that such information does not appear to have been collected in this detail before, if at all.

## OBJECTIVE

In the light of the economic climate and policies of the Coalition Government post-2010 General Election, Fair Play for Children was concerned to monitor the treatment of children's play and youth service expenditure by Councils, and to set this in context against both general council expenditure and also adult leisure expenditure. One area we did not cover was whether the play expenditure was also included in the general leisure expenditure. In one response a council did not separate the play expenditure and stated it was included in leisure.

In our experience over 3 decades or more, councils will, almost to 100%, point out that play expenditure is not mandatory, it is discretionary and that this will put it into the category of being more likely to be subject to variation by decision-makers. In the main, this will mean defined cabinet post holders, play will lie within a variety of programmes or departments, depending on how the councils organise their workloads. In our experience, much of the essential work and recommendations come from the employed officers.

Youth services include 13-17 year olds provision outside of formal education, there are statutory requirements as to provision within education legislation. Play expenditure is not so easily defined as to age but in general will mean services for those aged 5-12+, for unlike youth services there has not been statutory definition in the same way.

However, since starting this survey process, we also have started to examine the ways in which Local Education Authorities in England have been responding to provision in the Education Act 1996, as amended by the Education and Training Act 2006. Section 508 of the former re-enacted previous requirements re physical education and recreation both in the school setting and beyond - the amendment of the latter Act added Sections 507a and 507b in which there is relevant requirement on LEAs as to children's play provision and a duty to seek to cooperate with voluntary sector bodies. That FoI is in progress at this time, and the results will be published in due course and will make a useful adjunct to this Report.

Councils' provision will vary in terms of the type of authority. Unitary councils will have education responsibilities and thus youth services, and they also will cover children's play provision of all kinds. Non-unitary counties will not necessarily have play within their remit, but will as LEAs be responsible for youth services. Whereas district authorities will not have statutory youth service responsibilities but will have scope to provide for play. However, this does not mean, for example, that county councils will not provide for children's play - some do - nor that district councils will not make provision for youth which, however, is not a statutory obligation upon them. As will be seen, none of the foregoing protected youth services because of statutory obligation.

Councils also have their own respective policies on youth service provision, in recent years the trend has been away from the traditional open-access, anyone-can-join approach of the traditional youth club and cuts made by councils have pushed most services towards more targeted approaches. As for play, quite a few councils have adopted play policies, others remain without, and there is no statutory requirement for such policies to be developed. During the previous Labour Government, progress towards a national policy for Children's Play meant that those advocating distinct local policies also had some real leverage and also financial resources. Firstly there was Big Play, where the National Lottery was encouraged to, and did set aside funding to be available for councils for their own and third sector projects. This developed later to the three year Fair Play (no relation!) Government programme, also distributed to all councils based on population, where over £200 million was made available. In terms of previous provision, this was an enormous step, though

we would always point out that it was nowhere near the annual generosity, comparatively, of adult arts and sports funding by central government. A part of the funding went to Play England to enable coordination etc of the funding, and they appointed e.g. field staff and offices. Whilst we do feel that some of that funding was too easily appropriated by councils as against third sector bodies, at least we could see the whole process as a recognition of the need for a national policy framework developed by central and local government and third sector bodies at various levels, and reasonably resourced.

The advent of the Coalition Government in May 2010 changed the picture completely so that, for example, Play England found its funding slashed, almost the first in line in the so-called "bonfire of quangoes", thus receiving totally different and premature treatment to the arts and sports council bodies. The new Government also made it crystal clear that it intended to return to the previous position of central government that play is not a matter for national policy, that in line with 'localism' it was a matter most suitably decided at local level, again in contrast to arts and sport.

It will be seen, therefore, that the three years chosen - 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12 - were important as they straddled that transition in central government as well as 'marking the passage' of the first effects of the economic crisis. It may be asked, were such statistics collected and analysed before as regards play provision? We have found no evidence that it has been by central government departments, nor any other body.

The only evidence we could find was back in 1994 or thereabouts when Fair Play chanced across a report held by the Audit Commission but not undertaken by them. Our then findings can be summarised at:

[http://www.fairplayforchildren.org/index.php?page=A\\_Fair\\_Deal\\_For\\_Children&section=What\\_We\\_Do](http://www.fairplayforchildren.org/index.php?page=A_Fair_Deal_For_Children&section=What_We_Do) This showed that in 1994/5, Councils appeared to have spent £1.268 billion on adult leisure and £62.48 million on all forms of play provision, just 4.9% of adult leisure expenditure. It's true that we have since been unable to trace that data, the Audit Commission told us they did not have it, we did not retain the full data. We could find no other similar data in periods following, which was another reason we decided to undertake this task.

What is meant by "Play Provision"?

For clarity, it's made clear here that when we speak of play provision, playground provision in schools is not included. This does not mean this area is unimportant, but we are concentrating on provision in the community.

We do include the following as 'play provision' for the purposes of this Survey:

Unstaffed playgrounds - play equipment: these may be distinct play areas within or outside general recreation areas maintained by principal councils. Our Report on that type of provision's extent as to e.g. numbers of play areas and acreage, can be found at:

<http://www.fairplayforchildren.net/survey1.htm> This gave an average of 1 play area for every 692 children under the age of 16 in England.

This current expenditure survey questionnaire sought information as to both capital and revenue expenditure on play areas.

In terms of staffed provision, we sought information for council-provided holiday playschemes, and also for other provision run by councils - the latter can include, for example, play centres and adventure playgrounds.

We also asked about grant-aid to third sector bodies whose provision over the decades has included perhaps the most innovative and imaginative schemes as well as examples of "getting off one's rear when the council won't/hasn't". Given what we regard as the key role of such bodies in past years in developing such provision, some later taken on by councils as need was proven, we have been especially concerned to see how this element of provision has fared against other elements. Whilst the Government's Communities Minister appears to have made it clear that third sector bodies should not be subject to adversely greater cuts in grant aid, this is the first time there has been national evidence concerning third sector grant aid for play by councils over these three crucial years.

The youth service provision also seeks to find out how proportionate has its treatment been at the hands of council planners and decision-makers.

We're fully aware that our questions may beg some further questions, as to what was and was not included. This process is part of a learning curve for Fair Play, and it may well be that in future, even more reliable and consistent data can be gathered and analysed. We are a very small organisation, we would point out that, if we are correct, no one else has bothered to make such an attempt at all, and if that is the case, does that raise a question about how seriously does government regard play provision and what is happening to it? Nor have we seen evidence from the Local Government Association which represents all local government in England.

## **The Survey Results**

The Survey Questionnaire can be viewed: <http://tinyurl.com/FP-CouncilExp>

We asked:

Total Council Expenditure in each of three years, 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12

The results were:

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
38114479797	38334605629	35681298520
	100.58%	93.08%
	of previous year	of previous year

The % reduction by year is shown (and this is shown for all results below).  
The total figure is comparable with other results published by government sources so far as we can tell.

#### Total Council Expenditure on Adult Leisure

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
<u>1031389859</u>	<u>1073081376</u>	<u>931932879.4</u>
	<u>104.04%</u>	<u>86.85%</u>

#### Council Expenditure on Play Areas - Capital

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
87265535.16	61861870.68	38684168.47
	70.89%	62.53%

This accounted in each year respectively for the following % of adult leisure spending in that year

8.46	5.76	4.15
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We did not ask what proportion of such funding came from the previous Labour Government's provision - as with play expenditure below also, some of this was cut by the incoming Coalition Government, and additionally that funding ended within this 3 year period.

#### Council Expenditure on Play Areas - Revenue (includes maintenance, safety etc)

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
28264438.11	27102432.47	25497662.02
	95.89%	94.08%

% of adult leisure spending in that year

2.74	2.53	2.74
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#### Council-provided Holiday Playschemes

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
12507693.1	11,482,570.74	10,059,344.96

91.80%                      87.61%

% of adult leisure spending in that year

1.21                      1.07      1.08

Council-provided - other schemes (inc year-round)

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
16,155,787.86	15,720,528.26	12,776,224.76
	97.31%	81.27%

% of adult leisure spending in that year

1.57%                      1.46%                      1.37%

Grant-aid to Third Sector Play Organisations

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
16,565,050.77	17,608,360.31	11,661,803.3
	106.30%	66.23%

% of adult leisure spending in that year

1.61%                      1.64%                      1.25%

Therefore the total % in each year for all play funding as a proportion of adult leisure funding:

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
12.45	9.39	7.99

Youth Service Provision

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
24,346,7739.8	23,974,6356.1	18,205,2152
	98.47%	75.94%

## **Analysis of Results**

One clear result is that both children's play and youth services have suffered disproportionately in 2011-12 as regards cuts. The only area not thus affected by comparison is play area revenue, and here we would suggest that

this stems from health and safety/insurance origins and requirements which have statutory connotations.

It is concerning that all areas of staffed provision for children have suffered disproportionately, and third sector grant aid especially. The reduction in Play Area capital reflects, in our analysis, the cuts in / ending of the central government Fair Play funding, for the programme there sought to add 3,500 new or refurbished play areas in the programme's lifetime.

That programme also inputted resources to staffed provision and we feel the rightness and benefits of that programme are shown in some of the improved results for 2009-10, the last year of the Labour Government. At a total of 12.45% against adult leisure provision, this was not a good reflection of the needs of this segment of the population. However, the next year shows a further decline to below their numbers in the population, 9.39% (under 16s) whilst the final year, at 7.99% is simply not acceptable in terms of fairness or need. Though an improvement over 1994/5's lamentable figures, we ask, is this proportionate?

The question has to be asked, what is the situation in the following year, 2012-13?

Our deepest concern perhaps is in the treatment of the third sector - how can such a level of cuts be justified when we are sure that this sector in particular offers real value for tax- and charge-payers money. How is this a sound basis for talk of a "Big Society" - this area of provision offers one of the very best hopes for community engagement yet support for such involvement is simply fading away as regards local play initiatives. Many have gone and are going to the wall, hundreds of years of volunteer-time effort binned as far as the future is concerned.

It is said "money talks" and so does the lack of it if it's shown that a segment of the population is not being treated fairly. That applies not only to children short-changed of their play but also to those who beaver away giving their time and skills freely - we haven't discussed at all the equivalent value of voluntary workers but our experience suggests a gearing of at least threefold for every £ spent.

There is constant talk about childhood health, obesity, lack of exercise, reduction of outdoor play etc. This unstaffed and staffed provision has an important role although we do say that it constitutes but a part of children's play experience. Our Report, Stolen Streets, Stolen Childhood deals with the crisis of the loss of informal outdoor opportunity or play and the recognition may be growing slowly that a major shift is needed in planning and highways policy and practice:

<http://www.fairplayforchildren.org/pdf/1312920585.pdf> There is scope for real progress in terms of e.g. reviving and greatly extending the Play Street, though we fear that in many cases this will be short-term and tokenistic because of fear of neighbour opposition. Some people have always complained about kids playing, and too much notice has been paid to what is always a small minority.

In 2010 we sent parliamentary candidates a survey about their views regarding our Fair Play Manifesto. The response was very encouraging with 50-95% support in the various categories. Our Manifesto forms a basis for a serious national policy and programme for Children's Play:

<http://www.fairplayforchildren.org/pdf/1271101351.pdf>

## Performance by Party control of Councils

We have analysed our results by Party control. The %'s reduction are shown, 2011-12

	Total Expenditure	93.1	Total Leisure	86.9	Play Area Capital	62.5	Play Area Revenue
<b>ALL</b>							
	98	94.6		93.5		74.4	
Conservative							
<b>Labour</b>	40	89.3		85.6		47.9	
<b>Lib Dem</b>	13	90.5		93.3		55.6	
<b>NOC/OTHER</b>	64	93.9		79.4		58.2	

The 40 Labour Councils cover perhaps some of the most deprived areas but their poor showing on grant aid perhaps reflects a long-standing distrust of this sector's provision but also a commitment to 'do it ourselves' with regard to public service provision. But the Labour reductions are across the board greater than the Conservative's 106 councils. Indeed, if these figures are to be accepted (and we've made our caveats on this), Conservative Councils have cut total Council expenditure the least of all groups, Labour the most.

Conservative groups and NoC/Other show similar levels of cuts in third sector grant aid, better than Labour's performance, but still down by a third for the Conservatives and a quarter by the NOC, well below leisure cuts by their councils.

Perhaps the wooden spoon must go to the 13 Lib Dem Councils on third sector grant aid, down in one year to 0.44% of the previous year.

The above does not show the number of councils who made no grants to third sector bodies nor those who did not run their own playschemes or other activities in any of the three years.

In all three years	<u>Conservative</u>	<u>Labour</u>	<u>Lib Dem</u>	<u>NoC/Other</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Council Playschemes not provided	38	13	7	27	85
Other provision not provided	58	18	10	31	117
No Third Sector Grant Aid	49	16	12	25	102

This last figure is especially disturbing because it is not reflective of the current economic crisis necessarily. Maybe some Councils used to provide but made cuts were made prior to the survey period. But there is also the possibility that some of these Councils simply have not bothered with such provision. From this over one third of councils surveyed made no playscheme provision. Over 50% made no other staffed play provision. 43% made no grant aid provision for children's play.

It also appears that play provision is losing ground as a percentage of adult leisure spending year-by-year, again grant aid slipping the most.

It may be argued that there is additional provision for children in adult leisure centres etc, and that this needs to be taken into account. To what extent this is the case is not at all easy to estimate simply because councils do not in the main record usage by age. In any case, the figures quoted in this survey are net, that is council subsidy/contribution, in all aspects, and the gross figures would include payments made by or on behalf of children by e.g. parents, grandparents etc and thus not reflect subsidy levels. We are not aware of examples where Councils run paid-for leisure aimed at children which is not fully financed by fees - i.e. no subsidy.

What we feel is reflected in these results is a bias against children in terms of subsidy. It may be that more detailed breakdowns of Council expenditure by age of user might revise the impressions generated by our data. But these are the figures based on a return of 61.3% of the Councils sent the current FoI Survey by Fair Play.

What of the 137 non-responding councils, would their missing data change anything bar the total sums in each question area? The answer is, we do not know, but we can say that throughout this survey process, as the results were added, there has been remarkable consistency in terms of %'s as above in each expenditure area. However, we will seek full engagement by all councils and will revise this report and publish updates as and when this happens.

## **Points to Consider**

### Central Government

- Review the move away from a central government policy towards a purely 'localism' process as it is clear that children are being discriminated against as regards their play provision by councils, they are losing out badly.

Consider the need for a legislative basis for play provision, and note the work of the devolved administrations.

Set up annual monitoring along the lines of this Survey.

Make funding available on a matched basis to encourage Councils to support play provision and improvement of play environment - see also below.

Review UK Government and Public Body obligations under Article 31.2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child so that children are given appropriate and equal access to cultural and leisure resources.

Consider the need to establish an independent funding body for Children's Play, analogous to the Sports and Arts Council structures and appropriately funded on a level consistent with the proportion of children in the population and their needs, a standing policy of Fair Play from 1986 indeed.

Look at whether reporting requirements should be made. E.g. re S508, 507a and 507b.

### Parliament

Initiate debate, EDM, etc Select Committee consideration. Work across parties to develop consensus based on children's urgent health needs.

### Local Government

Urgently review funding and support commitments concerning children's play provision, and in particular give a boost to third sector grant funding as both restoring fairness and creating value for money together with community ownership.

Consider working arrangements between Councils especially to develop new provision along the Fair Play 'Play Wise' path.

Look at Article 31.2 obligations and audit equality issues around Play provision, as regards children and adult leisure.

Work with national third sector bodies involved in children's play policy and provision.

Ensure there is meaningful process to consult children and take their views into account, in line with Article 12 obligations.

LEAs to review Education Act 1996 S507a 507b and 508 obligations as regards provision and working with voluntary bodies.

### Third Sector

National bodies such as Play England, Fields in Trust, Daycare Trust, 4Children, Working on Wheels, KIDS, Fair Play, also regional play bodies, and children's rights bodies to consult together to consider how to work to influence national and council policies; work with Play Scotland, Play Wales and Playboard Northern Ireland to keep abreast of devolved government policies.

Vigorously lobby national government and local government bodies to ensure fairness and adequate provision.

### The Political Parties

Consider national policy to improve Play provision and resources, make a commitment to develop a national policy in Government and to put play funding on a statutory basis in view of the serious health and development issues at stake.

### Civil/Human Rights

Children's Commissioner for England - review this report, look at the importance of play for children and take action under new powers as needed.

Equality and Human Rights Commission - look at European Convention issues e.g. Article 14 and discrimination on grounds of age.

### The Media

Disseminate this Report

Encourage debate and response via reporting, further investigation, analysis.

## **Conclusion**

The current situation concerning statutory support for children's play provision in England has no national policy focus or direction, results from this survey to date suggest that local government is not treating these needs of children fairly or adequately and that a great deal needs to be done as a matter of priority given the known and accepted importance of Play in the health and development of all children.

If adult arts and sport can claim government policy involvement and the need for national-level funding bodies, as opposed to purely local government policy and involvement, the same must apply, to the same or even greater degree concerning the claim of Children's Play. Huge damage is being done to the voluntary sector in this matter, as the most innovative and best-delivering force in children's play, councils have imposed greater cuts on children's play as a whole than other aspects of their expenditure, and there has been no central government attempt to monitor this or to ensure fairness.

It is no good legislators bemoaning the state of children's health, risk-aversion or other cited ills, but then ignoring that Play has been disproportionately affected adversely by their decisions in the communities where those children live. It is no argument to claim that Play has to take its share of burdens along with every other sector. That only holds if that sharing is on a fair basis.

What is being signalled here is that Children's Play is still given lip service but when it comes to the crunch, it will be treated unfairly. Though England has a child population of 11.2 million under 16, and they form a smaller proportion of the population than hitherto, that 11+ million is the same as in 1901 and 1931. Yet children's play space in the community has shrunk hugely (the streets now belong wholly to the car, parked as well as moving). Given the concern generally about children not going out to play, this is no time to be curtailing and cutting what services there are.

If Play is as important to legislators as they routinely claim, then they will not just sit back and wring their hands and certainly not claim "we are all in this together". Children are Special, they deserve better. They deserve a Fair Deal for their Play. They do not need to be told they should accept their fair share of cuts, they have suffered most in this area.

Note: this report will be updated as further data is received.

#### UPDATE 2014:

Children & Young People Now undertook an FoI survey of Councils in late 2013 on similar grounds. The number of Councils responding was not as great as in the Fair Play survey which forms the basis for this report. For example, we recorded £133,78 million as total play expenditure in 2010/11 whereas the smaller-sample C&YPN survey gives £67.9 million - but their sample is a lot smaller. (It does raise serious questions as to how much councils are complying with Freedom of Information statutory obligations.) However, the broad trend of this later survey matches the outcomes of the Fair Play operation - still further cuts have been imposed on children's play by councils, and the warning is that still more can be expected. This is leading Fair Play for Children to pay serious attention to how councils, especially Local Education Authorities, are treating their legal duties re provision for children and young people under the 1996 Education Act.

The C&YPNow article can be accessed [HERE](#): CYP Now investigation: Play services decimated as funding slashed

The Full C&YPN survey results (Fair Play's Online Library