

Play Scotland

Scotland's Play Charter Debate, Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 14 March 2017

Committed to PLAY



Hosted by Ruth Maguire MSP

Transcript

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-03584, in the name of Ruth Maguire, on welcoming **Play Scotland's** play charter. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the promotion of Scotland's first inclusive Play Charter by **Play Scotland**, a group which works to promote the importance of play for all children and young people in Cunninghame South and across Scotland, and campaigns to create increased play opportunities in the community; understands that the charter describes a collective commitment to play for all babies, children and young people in Scotland, in (UNCRC); further understands that the charter builds on the Scottish Government's National Play Strategy and the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach to supporting children, young people and their families; notes the charter's aims of highlighting that every child has the right to play and the importance of play, ensuring that a commitment to play is more strongly embedded within policies, strategies, key qualifications and Continuous Professional Development training, ensuring that children and young people are supported in their right to play and that play spaces are valued within communities, inspiring individuals, play providers and organisations to promote a range of inclusive play opportunities, and to bringing back the sight and sound of children playing in communities; notes that all MSPs have been encouraged to become Play Champions by pledging their support to the charter, and wishes **Play Scotland** every success in its ongoing campaign.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

I thank all the MSPs from across the Parliament who signed the motion allowing the debate to take place, and all those who have stayed to participate in or to watch the debate.



I need to make a special mention of play champions in my constituency at St Luke's primary school and early years in Kilwinning. I visited the school on Friday and was hugely impressed by its commitment to play. Finn, one of the early years pupils, gave me a brilliant guided tour of their junkyard garden, of which they are rightly proud—thank you, Finn.

I extend a warm welcome to all our visitors in the public gallery, particularly Marguerite and Sharon from **Play Scotland**. I am grateful for all the good work that they do in encouraging play, and I look forward to joining them and their colleagues after the debate for a reception in committee room 5—members are, of course, encouraged to join us.

The debate is about the importance of play and of children's right to play. Growing up in the 1980s—or the olden days, as my daughter calls them—the opportunity to be outside playing was something that my friends, my brother and I took for granted. We went exploring on our bikes,

built ramps and bogies, and had games of kerby that went on all day. We also used to play games involving our favourite television shows, with “The Fall Guy” being the one that I remember vividly, which involved us in trying our best to emulate the characters Colt, Howie and Jody by climbing and jumping off things. I do not remember any serious injuries, but I remember the occasional gentle warnings shouted by our mums to “get off the garage roof”, or that “someone’s going to end up breaking something soon”.

The other day, the Minister for Childcare and Early Years, Mark McDonald, tweeted a picture of some magnificent chalk art on his street that brought a smile to my face, as that was another thing we used to play at when we were younger and I had not seen it since my girls were young. It was another great play activity that provided them with hours of amusement.

The United Nations definition of children’s play is “any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise.” In other words, play is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons. Play is also frequently described as what children and young people do when they are not being told what to do by adults. Play is an essential part of every child’s life, and it is vital for the enjoyment of childhood as well as for children’s social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.

The importance of play was unequivocally recognised when it was enshrined as a right in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force in 1990. Article 31 of the convention states: “Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.”

Article 31 was lent even more force in 2013, when the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted general comment 17, which clarifies and underlines for Governments worldwide the meaning and importance of article 31, as well as their obligations to “promote, protect and fulfil” children’s right to play by means of appropriate “legislation, planning and budgets”. The comment states:

“While play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.”

The fundamental value of play is also recognised by the Scottish Government, which launched Scotland’s first national play strategy in 2013. The strategy recognises the life-enhancing nature of play and affirms a commitment to enabling all children and young people to realise their right to play, in particular through facilitating sufficient space and time for play and promoting positive support for play.



Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):

I thank the member for taking an intervention and for bringing the debate to the Parliament. She makes an essential point about providing the facilities and the time for play. I get feedback locally about the deterioration of facilities such as play parks. Could more be done through liaison between the Scottish Government and local government to ensure that such facilities are maintained so that enjoyment can be provided?

Ruth Maguire:

I thank Liam McArthur for that intervention. His question is more for the Government than for me, but I would say that it is not always about play equipment; it is about the space and time for play. That can mean ensuring that the green spaces that we have outside are accessible. For example, one of the most depressing things that we see is a “No Ball Games” sign on a bit of pristine grass that looks perfect for football.

The play charter describes our collective commitment to play for all children and young people, in line with article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It builds on both the Scottish Government’s play strategy and the getting it right for every child approach to supporting children, young people and their families. It is hugely important in positively promoting play and providing a clear reference and rallying point for everyone with an interest in and responsibility for play.

I encourage all the MSPs who signed the motion also to consider pledging their support for the charter, becoming play champions and encouraging relevant individuals and organisations in their constituencies to pledge their support for the play charter, too. Let us do all that we can to ensure that the children and young people in the communities that we serve can enjoy all the wonderful opportunities to play that we did. It is their right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

Although I know that people in the public gallery will appreciate some of the things that are said, I ask them not to clap after each speaker. I will give them the opportunity to show their appreciation when the meeting closes.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):

I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing the debate to the chamber and giving us the opportunity to discuss a topic that is, as everyone present knows, close to my heart, and about which I am extremely passionate.



I have said many times in the chamber that education is a major solution to health and welfare issues. A key element of that is the impact that physical literacy can have on health inequality and the attainment gap. I maintain that we can close neither the attainment gap nor the health inequality gap—in terms of physical health and mental health—without fully addressing the physical literacy deficit that exists in tandem with other inequalities.

From a physiology perspective—allow me to get this out of the way first—we know that the cardiovascular system, the neuromuscular system and bone density, as well as neural pathways that are important in speech, listening skills, behavioural traits and attention capacity, are all established pre-school. We all intrinsically understand that a child who is given the opportunity to be active outside the classroom is more likely to have positive behaviour traits inside the classroom, is more likely to engage in the classroom and is, therefore, more likely to achieve.

However, we seem to be obsessed increasingly with making children sit still all the time. It is unnatural. Part of the brain switches off in youngsters if they are forced to sit still for too long without any physical activity. Children are not built to sit still. Good grief, Presiding Officer—I am not built to sit still! I would be in constant trouble with you if part of your remit was to get MSPs to sit still with their arms crossed and to sit up straight. There would be a naughty step on which I lived all the time.

That brings us to the importance of active play—especially in the early years. As I have said before, youngsters want to move about a lot with their peers. In doing so, they set patterns for life and learn interaction skills, confidence, resilience, self-awareness and awareness of others—all behaviours that are much more difficult to learn sitting still in a nursery or classroom, but which have a huge influence on outcomes from the classroom. We have not got that right yet. We need to consider how we give every child the opportunity for outdoor and indoor play: climbing, jumping—in puddles, if necessary—falling down, getting back up, catching, throwing and all the other ways that they can invent to learn in their own ways.

That is the blueprint for life. That is how we tackle preventable ill health and stack the cards in our favour. It is how we give ourselves a better opportunity to tackle the obesity crisis, diabetes, musculoskeletal issues, chest, heart and lung issues, not to mention rising mental health issues, all of which disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged people in our society and which—apart from anything else—cost our national health service billions of pounds.

That is what I mean when I talk about behavioural drivers. I maintain that, if we could get our youngsters active at the earliest opportunity and give them the pathway to remain active all through their school years, the chances of their choosing not to smoke, not to take up alcohol, not to be overweight, and to eat well and to have good mental health would be hugely increased. We have to look at access to such opportunities and we have to break down the barriers to participation.

I had the powerchair footballers from the South Ayrshire Tigers in Parliament today. I have often mentioned them and the fact that they hammered an MSP football team last year. If members ever want to understand what having an opportunity to participate means and the impact that it can have on lives, they should speak to that team. They are just the most amazing group of people. Participation has taken them out of isolation and into the mainstream.

That all starts with access to active play, and with the premise that it is every child's right to play with their friends, get dirty, be noisy and be sociable, irrespective of background or personal circumstances—all the things that we took for granted when we were kids. In my view, that is the basis of solving many of the problems that we see in our society today.

Once again, I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing the debate to the chamber and for allowing me another chance to rant about my very favourite topic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

You know, I am liking the idea of a naughty step.

Brian Whittle:

That worries me.



Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):

I thank my colleague Ruth Maguire for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

Children have a right to play, as enshrined in article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but the issue is about much more than that: we all know that play is what teaches our children social skills, how to compromise and how to be tolerant and resilient. Play is the universal

language of childhood. Even young animals play: we buy toys for our dogs, cats, rabbits and hamsters. The benefits of play in the developing years simply cannot be overstated.

However, not all children are lucky enough to be given encouragement to play or to be bought toys that most children come to expect. As a former children's panel member, I have seen children who were so neglected and starved of attention that they had to be taught how to play. It was then that I realised what an important part of a child's development play is.

Since 1998, the benefits of **Play Scotland's** inclusive strategic approach have been significant. It aims to ensure that no child is left out. The play charter challenges barriers and ensures that discrimination and stigma based on age, gender, disability, ethnicity, poverty or low income have no place in affecting children's play experiences, so that all children feel included.

As was outlined by Brian Whittle, the benefit of play to the physical, emotional and mental health of children and young people is immense. Through play, they are able to develop social skills and responsibility, to appreciate the environment and to participate in sports, art and culture. That grows their identity and self-esteem and, in turn, makes them less likely to offend and to engage in antisocial behaviour in later life.

I welcome the positive development that we have heard about, which builds on the Scottish Government's national play strategy and the getting it right for every child approach to supporting children, young people and their families.

The play charter's commitment to training adults so that they can support high-quality play experiences in a variety of places where children play is also positive. Those places include nurseries and childcare venues, schools, children's services facilities, out-of-school clubs and holiday schemes. The approach works to ensure high-quality play experiences across key areas that contribute to children's development and growth, and which affect their daily life experiences.

The play charter supports children's participation in the planning, development and evaluation of play services, recognising them as play experts and seeking out their views. Of course, that ensures that children and young people are engaged and that the play charter is reflective of their interests and needs. **Play Scotland's** campaigning through the play charter to ensure that play is more strongly embedded within policies, strategies and key qualifications is welcome with regard to making sure that we get it right for every child.

We must all encourage children to play, and we must create the correct environments—indoors and outdoors—where they can do that. Play is not a luxury for our children—in my view, it is essential to the health and wellbeing of future generations.

I wish **Play Scotland** continued success in its campaign and would be happy to be a play champion. I wish it well in its attempts to raise awareness of the benefits of play and of providing inclusive play experiences for children across Scotland.



Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I, too, thank Ruth Maguire for bringing this debate to the chamber—not least because it gives me another opportunity to talk in the chamber about my children. It is always a delight to do so.

One of the most recent innovations in my household is that my 18-month-old daughter has taken to leaving the sitting room and pulling the door closed behind her while saying “Buh-bye”—then, a couple of moments later, a wee smiley face pops round the door going, “Ello”. That demonstrates the importance of play. By doing that, my daughter is exploring language, learning how to use words and, what is more, having a wee laugh while she does it. That encapsulates just how important play is in the development of children.

We are right to talk about the importance of article 31 and children’s right to relax, play and take part in cultural and artistic activities, but the issue is much more important than that, because it is about how our children learn. The insight that children need to play in order to learn goes back to the early 20th century. The importance of play to children’s cognitive and emotional development, to their ability to self-regulate and to their language development has been well demonstrated. The 16 most powerful predictors of children’s academic achievement are based on how well they learn to play, so it is concerning that the area in which children are allowed to range and play unsupervised has shrunk by 90 per cent since the 1970s. The debate is important and we need to talk about the issues because play is not just our children’s right, but what they need in order to learn.

I will talk briefly about an Edinburgh scheme in which I took part last year: the playing out scheme. As a result of frenetic activity and lobbying by a group of parents, a number of roads in Edinburgh were closed for a single day so that children could go out and play. It was fantastic. There was chalk drawing on pavements and bicycle races going up and down the roads, and parents were standing talking, drinking coffee and sharing home baking. There were huge benefits—not just to the children but to the adults and the communities in which they live. This year there will be a five-month-long pilot from April to August. Streets can be closed on five dates in that period. The council has prepared a simple checklist and application form, and it is free for parents to apply to take part. The scheme is a demonstration of a simple thing that addresses many of the challenges. It enables and makes it easy for parents to take the initiative, and it is exactly the sort of thing that we should be considering.

We should welcome the play charter, which sets out a number of great things, but it is key that we ensure that the actions are embedded in policy. The play strategy that the Government has set out is right, but we also need to set out the challenges. One in six children in Scotland does not have access to outdoor space, 85 per cent of children in Scotland say that they do not spend enough time engaged in free play, and more than 1,000 Scottish schools have no access to outdoor facilities. We must just offer warm words and support the actions, but instead set challenges for the Government.

This is a consensual debate and it should remain so, but when we talk about facilities, we need talk about local services and the impact of local funding. We must have some innovation. Schemes such as playing out will come at little cost to local government. We should consider whether we should be opening our schools during summer holidays in order to enable play and to address issues of childcare in the holidays. We also need to talk about local services. If we are to have

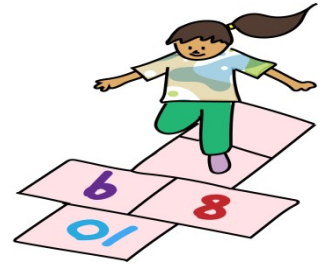
accessible and stimulating parks in which our children can play, that requires investment in local services.

I thank Ruth Maguire for securing the debate: the topic is hugely important. We should all champion play, but we should also challenge the Government: let us have some action and let us have some investment.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):

I share Daniel Johnson's approval of the playing out days.

I actually chalked on Abbotsford Crescent during playing out day last year. When the street was closed it attracted not just children: people from toddlers to 80-year-olds were there. The scheme turned the street into a place for people.



I thank Ruth Maguire for securing a debate on what is an important issue. We can all do more to safeguard and promote the rights of children, and the right to play is absolutely central to children's experience. We know that challenging, active play is essential for children's health and wellbeing, and when we look at rates of childhood obesity it is clear that we can and must do better. A recent study led by the University of Strathclyde showed that children's levels of physical activity begin dropping off as early as the age of seven.

We have much to do. We need to push for a more child-friendly, play-centred society, and that requires a cultural shift. Ruth Maguire spoke about a "No ball games" sign. Just down the road from where I stay there is a little cul-de-sac that was tailor-made for children's play, but residents woke up one morning and guess what was there? A "No ball games" sign. It took quite a lot of work to have that sign removed. How many children have had their sporting skills and physical activity held back by that kind of intolerant attitude?

Developing child-centred communities is crucial, and ensuring that nurseries have adequate outdoor space has to be at the heart of any planned expansion of childcare provision in Scotland. My colleague John Finnie recently shared a photo on Twitter of a sign that said "Play street from 4 pm until sunset". If members could have found any space to play between the parked cars, they are more able than I am at imagining how to play in that busy urban space.

There are simple steps that we can take. If we had space for wellies and waterproofs in primary school changing areas—and they were provided as a matter of course—there would be no such thing as an "indoor break time" just because it was a little wet outside. We all know the impact of children who are bursting with energy and how difficult it is for them to sit down and focus—that is not fun for teachers or for pupils.

We can all agree that children's needs have rarely been at the heart of planning processes. Article 12 of the UN convention gives children a right to be consulted, for their views to be given due weight and for them to be heard in matters that affect them, but how often are children truly involved in consultations about residential developments and planning decisions about places where they can play? The space afforded to play areas in some developments is meagre and their design is dull, to put it politely. In the play area closest to my home, one would have to have the hands of a man of 6 foot 5 to be able to hold on to the bars. It would never have been designed that way if toddlers had been asked what they wanted.

That said, there are some excellent examples of challenging play spaces for children and families. The fantastic play project the Yard in Edinburgh shows how inclusive play can be. I am glad that Scotland's play charter stresses that we must promote inclusive play and ensure that our play environments meet the needs of children with disabilities, too. Sadly, too many children in Scotland do not have appropriate access to places to play.

Good-quality housing also plays a part. Too many new homes lack adequate space for children to play indoors or outside. Who has room for a sandpit or a little water table in a small two-bedroom flat? Shelter Scotland's recent report showed that families with children spent almost 1 million days in temporary accommodation last year and that 13 per cent of families with children who needed temporary accommodation were there for longer than a year. Those children are being badly failed on their right to play in their homes.

Playing outdoors is more difficult than it should be. Traffic poses a barrier to outdoor play and a 20mph speed limit across all built-up areas would make it much safer, and would also improve air quality.

Article 31 of the UN convention established the right to play for all children and young people up to the age of 18. In any future work, I ask the Scottish Government to not forget that the right to play, to explore one's environment and to socialise does not stop at the age of 10, 12 or 15—it goes on. We should work together to promote the charter and the right to play.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

There are still quite a few members who wish to speak in the debate, so I will be happy to accept a motion without notice under rule 8.14.3 to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Ruth Maguire*]

Motion agreed to.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):

I thank Ruth Maguire for lodging the motion and for bringing Scotland's first play charter to the chamber. For years, experts from health and education have called for an inclusive, formal play charter to ensure that every child in Scotland is given the opportunity to play, explore and develop. Today, thanks to **Play Scotland**, the charter is a reality.



We all know the importance of play in developing happy, healthy, well-rounded young children. From our getting it right for every child approach to the play strategy action plan, play is at the heart of guaranteeing the wellbeing of children, and we want Scotland to be the best place for children to grow up. By supporting the play charter, we can show our commitment to that valuable cause.

As the debate has progressed, I have thought back to my childhood, particularly up to the age of eight when I lived in Kelvingrove. I spent a lot of time building dens, climbing trees and in disused railway tunnels; I sneaked in through tunnels to the old sweetie factory and looked for tunnels under Yorkhill hospital when I was not actually digging them. I also dug for treasure under Glasgow art gallery before sneaking in to count the nipples on the statues, as young boys invariably did. My tunnelling did not quite extend to Steve McQueen's, trying to get a motorbike over the Swiss border, but my childhood was extremely adventurous.

When I became a father, I tried to continue that approach with my children, taking them to the forest to look for trolls—which are a notorious problem in the Campsies—and river rafting and canyoning. I wrestled with them as often as possible, which my wife criticised me for heavily until a *Sunday Times* article pointed out the importance of rough-and-tumble between fathers and male children in particular—although my daughter was much more violent and unforgiving than her two brothers.

The benefits of play are huge and well proven, not just for ourselves but for our communities, where play still forms an integral part of life for young people of all backgrounds. It is important that children have the freedom to construct their own play. Let us take the example of the Eglinton country park inclusive play area, which opened in North Ayrshire in 2011. The space is available for boys and girls of all physical, mental and social abilities. It was designed in consultation with four special needs schools in North Ayrshire, by listening to what children really wanted: a space to allow them to develop and explore the world in their own way. That project has been successful, and sheds light on what Scotland's play charter is all about. Inclusive play means that no child is left behind, and that we continue to address the barriers that prevent children from enjoying play, no matter what the circumstances. I hope to see other such projects flourish throughout my constituency and across Scotland.

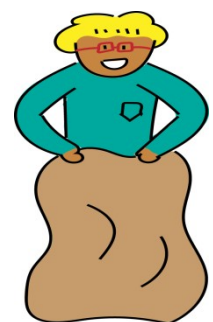
As we all know, the right of children to relax and play is formally enshrined in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by the UK in 1991. Under the convention, our children have a right to play regardless of age, gender, disability, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. I thank **Play Scotland** for doing such an excellent job in increasing awareness of the importance of play to the development of children and young people in Scotland. I welcome the fact that 88 per cent of households now have access to some form of play area in their neighbourhood, although more could be done to ensure that those play areas are accessible, safe and inclusive for all—particularly for the 12 per cent who do not have access.

I am heartened to see that many MSPs have pledged themselves to Scotland's play charter and I hope that many more will join the list in the coming weeks. We can demonstrate our commitment to play in our policies and strategies, and inspire individuals, play providers and organisations to promote a range of play activities that are inclusive of all children.

I look forward to working with **Play Scotland** to find further opportunities to remove barriers to inclusive play in my Cunninghame North constituency, to help ensure that we really do get it right for every child. Regardless of whether children play on their own or with friends, whether play is loud and boisterous or quiet and contemplative, whether it is spontaneous and creative or serious and strategic, it is time for us all to take play much more seriously in our homes, our schools and our communities.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):

One of my favourite programmes when I was growing up was “Why Don't You?” which challenged us to switch off the television and go and do something more useful instead. It gave lots of ideas about how to play. That was really important for me and my younger brothers as we were growing up. Suddenly our world was given a new horizon. We could go into the back garden and see it not as only a back garden, but as many different things. Many happy hours were played there.



I welcome **Play Scotland** here this evening and apologise that I will not be going to its reception because I will be rushing off to play with my children at home after this debate.

I touch now on a slightly different area, because some parents do not know how to play with their children or how to encourage their children to play.

When my two young girls were slightly younger, we used to go to an organisation called Dads Rock here in Edinburgh. Dads Rock was set up to encourage fathers to play with their children. There is still a legacy from many decades back that means that fathers perhaps do not interact and play with their children as well as mothers do. On a Saturday morning, Dads Rock simply brought together children and their fathers and gave them tools and a framework to learn to play. It worked really well. Not only were we allowed a snack, which my wife would never let us have at home, we actually got to play with toys and books, and we were given a framework within which to do that. The only sad thing was that although the organisation was located in a more deprived part of the city, it was middle class people coming in from middle class areas who benefited from its free service.

When we talk about play, we need to look at how we encourage all fathers and mothers, whatever their background, to interact and to take the time to play with their children. We all live very busy lives. We all have emails to answer and work to do in the house. We all have pressing demands on us. I suspect that, too often, playing with our children drops down our agenda. We need to send out the message that, if the washing is not done just when it should have been done because people are playing with their children, that is a sacrifice worth making.

The second area that I want to cover has already been mentioned by two members, and that is the playing out scheme in Edinburgh. I too attended the event last year. If we can recapture that, even in a limited situation, and close streets off so that children can again learn to play on the street with each other and with parental supervision and input, we will start to break down barriers. I thank Ruth Maguire for lodging the motion and highlighting a really important issue, and I wish **Play Scotland** all the best as it moves forward along with other organisations and seeks to encourage us all, whether we are grandparents, parents, uncles or aunts, to play with children and to encourage them to play in appropriate ways.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):

I, too, thank Ruth Maguire for bringing the debate to Parliament. As parents, we sometimes find it too easy to fear for our children's safety, and it can become a habit to keep children indoors and off the streets. Time feels increasingly scarce and, if a parent works shifts or is a single parent, it can be a challenge for them to send their children outside rather than keep them indoors, especially when they know that a child who is using their computer or watching TV indoors is safe and secure.



We should not lose sight of the benefits of play from an early age. For infants, programmes such as the baby brain workout, which Barnardo's promoted during last year's infant mental health awareness week, identify play as a key pillar of infant learning and emotional development. As Brian Whittle said, early interaction is important for the neurobiological development of infants' brains.

Children who play outside with others grow into curious, well-adjusted adults who not only are healthier but develop key social skills. Play stimulates and enhances learning, and it fosters

creativity, which means that the time that we value indoors—such as time that is spent reading books—should be balanced with time outdoors to consolidate learning.

Outdoor play is a great leveller. It allows those who come from more challenging backgrounds to get some of the same stimulation and fun as those who come from wealthier families get. We should create spaces for play that reflect the understanding that children have different abilities and interests. We should also bring children of different interests and abilities together by using universal design, rather than separate them into overspecialised spaces.

Breaking the monoculture of public spaces is a good thing. Not all children are interested in a football pitch or able to take advantage of the facilities that are focused on able-bodied children. However, the biggest obstacle to play, especially in more deprived communities, is a lack of play spaces, as we have heard from some speakers.

In my constituency of Rutherglen, the redevelopment of Cuningar loop has been a fantastic step towards giving everyone the opportunity to play and to reconnect with the outdoors in their own way. The loop is set in 15 hectares of what was derelict land—the size of 15 football pitches—and it has been transformed into a community green space for local people and visitors to get involved, get active and be inspired by the outdoors. In one cohesive space, it has walking and cycling facilities, a workout area and Scotland's first outdoor bouldering park, as well as picnic and outdoor classroom facilities. It was part funded by the Scottish Government as part of the 2014 Commonwealth games legacy and it provides just the sort of opportunities that Scotland's play charter is looking to achieve.

The Scottish Government has invested £7 million through the go play and go2play programmes to support play for children in disadvantaged communities across Scotland. Women's Aid in South Lanarkshire has received funding from the go2play capacity building fund to introduce free play clubs. The clubs allow primary school-aged children who have experienced domestic abuse the opportunity to play with peers in a safe environment. The organisation also promotes the benefits of play for children from challenging backgrounds.

Through an active commitment to the value of play, we can target improving mental health, educational attainment and social mobility. A happy, stimulated and socially integrated child has a far greater chance of leading a fulfilling and happy life. Along with the Government, I believe in the value of play in improving the lives and the life chances of children in Scotland. That is why I have pledged my support to the charter and have signed up to become a play champion. I recommend that everyone in the chamber should do so too, to support our young people.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):

I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing tonight's debate to the chamber. I apologise to her and to the minister for having to leave before the end of the debate to make a constituency engagement.



I want to say a few words because of the importance of play to children's development and early learning. A great deal of research provides us with clear evidence of that. I have seen the importance of play with my own eyes because, in previous jobs, I have seen children and their parents trying to do the best that they can in the most difficult circumstances—in circumstances of war, of displacement or of grinding and almost unimaginable poverty. It is remarkable that, no

matter how difficult the circumstances, children will still find a way to play and a way to exercise their imaginations with the most limited resources.

We must understand that the importance of play is an international issue. I know that **Play Scotland** is part of the International Play Association. In the previous parliamentary session, the IPA's executive body met here once. I hosted a meeting of the IPA's board in the Scottish Parliament as the IPA wanted to show its interest in what was happening in Scotland.

The right to play is very much an international issue, which is why it appears in article 31 of the UNCRC. However, it is right that we look to home and do not assume that just because we do not have the particular difficulties, everything is fine, because it is clear from many of the contributions that it is not and that we could do better.

I will make a couple of remarks on one or two issues that have come up. In the play charter, **Play Scotland** is very clear that children's right to play is not an add-on; it must be embedded in our approach to parenting and to early learning. That is critical.

In passing, I mention the excellent programme support from the start, which East Lothian Council runs as part of its early learning strategy. The programme provides many opportunities, particularly but not solely in the school holidays, for children to play and for their parents to learn more about how to support effective play.

Places are important to play. That really matters and it is a big factor in the concern that many have expressed about the reduction in recent years in the opportunity or capacity to play outside and in children being allowed to play outside. Daniel Johnson mentioned concerns about the number of school playing fields being reduced. That is not the case in East Lothian Council's area, where 86 per cent of our schools have playing fields, which is the second best percentage in Scotland.

A local authority's approach to school playing fields is reflected in its approach to the greater community spaces that Clare Haughey spoke about. For example, again in East Lothian, there has been tremendous effort by a community group that supports Cuthill park, which has transformed the park and the play opportunities there. On Saturday, the group will launch the latest of those—the woodland learning zone.

Finally, I know that this is not really in the minister's brief, but perhaps he could talk with his colleague the Minister for Local Government and Housing about the detrimental effect that new housing developments and the factoring of common land can have on play areas. Many private housing developments in my constituency have children's play areas because the planning permission demands that but, having provided that, the developers pass on the ownership of those small packets of land to factors, which sometimes sell them on to somebody else altogether. That makes it difficult to maintain those play areas, which often end up being a blight rather than an opportunity for children.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):

I am delighted to speak in the debate. I, too, thank Ruth Maguire for bringing it to the chamber and giving us all the opportunity to participate. Like other speakers, I fully welcome the promotion of Scotland's first inclusive play charter by **Play Scotland** and I agree that play for all children and young people is vital. Play is fundamental in



allowing children to develop and grow and it is important to the wider aim of tackling social inequalities. We must ensure that all children in Scotland have equal access to play, because play has an important role in learning, and that will aid in closing the attainment gap. As members have alluded to, it has been proven that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have less access to play, due to negative barriers such as a lack of sustainable and safe local spaces. That is important in an area such as mine, where for two of the four secondary schools, nearly half of their enrolled children are in the most deprived bracket in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation.

I fully believe that play should be offered at all levels in school and in all aspects of the community. I have enjoyed hearing members' stories about when they were growing up. Like Ruth Maguire, I grew up in the 1980s, and there was lots of open space to play sports or to take part in physical activity. Where I grew up in Coatdyke, there was a bit that we called the grass, and everybody went down there. I spent my whole summer holidays there, from 9 o'clock in the morning right through till 9 or 10 at night, playing football, hidey or whatever. Now, when I walk down there, there is never anybody playing, and there are lots of "No ball games" signs when, actually, it is a pretty safe and good place to play. That is such a shame.

A lot of spaces, such as at Dunbeth park or what used to be Espieside, now have 4G pitches on them. Those are excellent facilities and I have used them myself, but they are often unaffordable, particularly for young people. Just last week, I received a letter from a 13-year-old who is at Chryston high school. He and his friends were playing football on the 4G pitch at the high school and they had to be removed. It was not the fault of any of the staff that they had to be removed, but the pitch was not actually booked by anybody else. That begs the question of whether we could make better use of such places at times when they are not being used.

I know that, in North Lanarkshire, there is an issue about private finance initiatives in schools, which might come into play in the legal sense. However, the general principle is that we should try to make use of all our spaces. That helps with nurture, development and wellbeing, as well as, as I have already said, closing the attainment gap.

I want to mention an organisation in my constituency, which is parent action for safe play. It has a purpose-built, state-of-the-art playground that I had the pleasure of visiting last month. Over the last 15 years, the organisation has worked in the area to develop and improve play, youth and sport services for local children and young people. Its motto is that it is run by the local community, for the local community.

Parent action for safe play has very impressive facilities that include a soft-play area, outdoor ball-game facilities, a community garden and an adventure playground. The space is enjoyed by the wider community, which is an example of an organisation that is not using the space opening it up so that people can come in. There is no locked gate or anything like that; the outdoor facilities are there for everybody to use.

The organisation also provides services for local neighbourhoods, community groups and schools, such as training older children in the schools to become play champions in order for that to be sustainable. Schools will buy into its services for perhaps a year or two, and then it is to be hoped that they can keep going from there. It is a really good set-up. Last week, I was delighted to receive an email saying that it had received £120,000 of funding from Children in Need in order to provide an even greater range of opportunities across my constituency.

Before finishing, I will say, very briefly, that I am also pleased that, through the seven lochs wetland park project, there will be a new plan inclusive play area site in North Lanarkshire, at Drumpellier country park in my constituency. It will have a crannog play unit, which is the first of its kind in Scotland. I know that a lot of work and research have gone into that. It is very much an enhanced play provision, and the lochs at Drumpellier park—as the area is known more widely—are already a very good tourist attraction, so that might be more encouragement for people to come.

I thank Ruth Maguire again. I will not be able to make tonight's reception. I do not want to be outdone by either Daniel Johnson or Jeremy Balfour; I too need to go home and play with my child.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

I ask all members who are here to remember—and perhaps to pass on to their colleagues in their groups—that I find it courteous for members who take part in a debate to stay until the end of that debate, unless they have received permission from the Presiding Officer, by note, to leave early. Thank you.

Mr Greer is the last of the open speakers.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):

Thank you, Presiding Officer.



As colleagues have done, I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing the **Play Scotland** charter to Parliament for debate. I also thank Robin Harper for helping me to prepare for this debate. I welcome Robin back to the chamber and hope that he has as enjoyable a view from the public gallery as he had in his time down here on the floor of the chamber.

Over the past two decades in Scotland, we have seen some significant advancements in education. Importantly, many are based on an appreciation that the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic need to be supported by strategies that encourage all our children and young people to be confident, to have good social skills and to enhance their creativity.

However, at the same time we see a host of trends that work against the overall aims of the curriculum for excellence—especially the lack of esteem for the physical, creative and communication components. Unfortunately, art, music, drama, technical subjects and languages are always the first victims of budget cuts. That regressive trend, if it is allowed to continue, will deprive our youngest children during the very years when they need to learn and develop at their own natural speed, using their huge curiosity and motivation to experiment.

Restrictions that deprive children of the opportunity to play in the open air, to set their own targets and to develop their social skills and their ability to relate to others are counterproductive, and indeed they can be destructive.

In listening to other members reminisce about their time spent in playing, I realised that mine was not that long ago. Actually, I have a connection with one other member in the chamber, in that I played with Rona Mackay's son; we were in the same cub group. I realise that that was a risky play to make—I am sure that I will suffer for it later—but it was exactly those sorts of outdoor play and social skills that we were learning through that.

Presiding Officer, this is not a fringe debate; it is one of vital importance to wellbeing and social cohesion in Scotland. We cannot separate play from the development of language skills, motor skills or the risk-assessment skills that all children need to keep themselves safe.

Many ambitious parents believe that they need to give their children an advantage by their beginning formal education as early as possible. In Sue Palmer's book, "Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It", she cites evidence from across Europe that a playful approach to language and learning is as effective and often more effective than an old-fashioned drill-and-learn regime. Indeed, by the age of 10, the language skills of children who have had the joys of a child-centred education are statistically the same as or are often ahead of those of children who have been subjected to the rigours of formal education. All the research, including the United Kingdom's current effective provision of pre-school education project, points to the importance of talk that arises from children's own interests; outdoor play, whether that is free or supervised; music and song; and not having until the age of five a playful introduction to phonics, well before plunging into pencil and paper work.

Finland and Sweden are often cited in debates in the chamber. Formal education does not start until the age of seven in those countries. They are at the top of the international league for literacy attainment, and there are the additional benefits of much lower achievement gaps between rich and poor and between the genders.

I congratulate **Play Scotland** and Ruth Maguire on bringing a debate on the play charter to the Parliament. **Play Scotland** is a great focal point for debate and discussion for professionals and practitioners of early years education in Scotland, and I hope that it will continue to push to ensure that we improve what happens for our young people.

Many organisations that work outside and alongside our schools and nurseries—the Scottish Wildlife Trust, forest schools, the John Muir Trust and eco-schools, for example—supplement in their own ways the work that is done by early years and pre-school teachers. The Government should do all that it can to ensure that we share the joy of nature and the outdoors with children throughout Scotland, and the play charter should give us all the push that is needed to ensure that that happens.

The Minister for Childcare and Early Years (Mark McDonald):

I will do my best to respond to an excellent and wide-ranging debate, which I thank Ruth Maguire for securing. I also thank **Play Scotland** for its on-going support for play and for facilitating this evening's reception to celebrate Scotland's play charter. The turnout for the debate, which is a lot higher than the turnouts that we often get for members' business debates, demonstrates the strong commitment that exists to play throughout Scotland. The Government shares that commitment.



I will respond to some of the points that have been made. Ruth Maguire and Rona Mackay emphasised the right to play as articulated in article 31 of the UNCRC. We in the Government also see that as very important. That is why we developed Scotland's national play strategy in collaboration with the play sector to help us to raise the profile of the impact of play and ensure that Scotland's children achieve their full potential. We believe that play is central to that.

I thank the play strategy implementation group for working with us to create and enhance the fundamental building blocks that will enable and inform a more playful Scotland in which children

can realise their right to play every day. I strongly believe that the play charter will help us to further embed the principles of the play strategy, and I again thank **Play Scotland** for continuing to diligently encourage us to commit to play as an essential ingredient of children's wellbeing.

The play charter is right to focus on inclusivity and our shared vision for play. It seeks to improve the experiences of all children and young people, including those with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and it aims to ensure that all children and young people can access play opportunities in a range of settings that offer variety, adventure and challenge. They must be able to play freely and safely while learning to manage risks and make choices about where, how and when they will play according to their age, stage, ability and preference.

Brian Whittle spoke about physical literacy and its impact on children's health and wellbeing, as he often does in the Parliament—and rightly so. Play is crucial for children's healthy development. A growing body of evidence supports the view that playing throughout childhood is not only an innate behaviour; it contributes to children's quality of life, wellbeing and physical, social and cognitive development.

I firmly believe that nothing is more powerful than a child's imagination—it can take a child anywhere and make them anything. Through our investment in play, we are working with families to create spaces and places for that imagination to thrive. Play is one of the keys to unlocking the potential of Scotland's children.

As part of our expansion of early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours a year by the end of the current parliamentary session, we are working with the Care Inspectorate, the Scottish Futures Trust and others to publish new good practice design guidance for all early learning and childcare centres across the sector by the summer, which will include looking at outdoor play provision. We are running a series of trials, some of which will look at outdoor play. A project that is based here in Edinburgh will look at the establishment of outdoor nursery provision through a nature kindergarten.

This morning, I had the pleasure of speaking to early learning and childcare higher national certificate students at West College Scotland's Clydebank campus. I was asked about how we get the public to understand the importance of early learning and childcare to children's development and asked to get across that it is not just about sitting around and playing. I questioned why we need to make that distinction. Exploratory play is fundamental—it is critical—to children's development; it is how they learn about shapes, textures, colours, words and numbers.

Daniel Johnson spoke about investment. The Government continues to invest in play and, this year alone, we have invested more than £3 million in it. That includes funding of £700,000 for play, talk, read, £1.6 million for the bookbug programme and £260,000 for **Play Scotland**, plus a host of other fantastic initiatives.

Since 2012, we have invested more than £3 million in Inspiring Scotland's go2play play ranger fund. The fund supports Scottish charities to develop play ranger provision for vulnerable children and disadvantaged groups and to engage them in active outdoor play. Play rangers provide a huge number of benefits not only for our children but for parents and communities, by enabling children to play in spaces that are familiar to them, such as their street or local park, while giving parents peace of mind and encouraging positive interaction between children and the wider community.

Alison Johnstone mentioned the Yard. A reception was recently held in Parliament to celebrate its 30th birthday. Inclusive play is important, and I want it to be encouraged much more widely. I am concerned that it is often an afterthought, particularly for soft play centres, which often run relaxed and inclusive sessions at times that they deem to be quiet. Those times are quiet because they are inconvenient, and they are as inconvenient for families with disabled children as they are for other families. That issue needs to be recognised.

Alison Johnstone also spoke about consulting children. I have experience of that from my time as a local councillor, when a play park in my community—the one that I used to play in as a child—had fallen into disrepair. Through working alongside community workers in the council, we consulted widely with children who lived around the play area on how they wanted it to be redeveloped. A budget was identified and the park was redeveloped. The play area is now busy and thriving, when previously families tended to avoid it. There are good examples of children being consulted about play opportunities.

Kenneth Gibson gave us an interesting insight into his childhood—we will leave it at that. He emphasised that play is about freedom and opportunity. If we restrict those aspects, we restrict opportunities for children to develop their potential fully.

Jeremy Balfour made an important point about fathers who do not interact and play with their children, or who perhaps do not do so until the children are a bit older. He emphasised the importance of early play and interaction with fathers to develop bonds and develop children's crucial cognitive abilities.

Clare Haughey touched on various areas in which play has an impact. She mentioned mental health, and it is worth recognising that area, particularly when we look at the other pressures that children and young people face in our communities.

Iain Gray highlighted a number of good examples from his East Lothian area. He asked me to raise an issue with the Minister for Local Government and Housing about ensuring that play areas in new developments are not only suitable but maintained. I will be happy to raise that with my colleague Kevin Stewart following the debate.

Fulton MacGregor made an important point about how best to use spaces; that point was also made by Daniel Johnson. We need to look more carefully at how well we use spaces and facilities—particularly those that sit empty for long periods and could be better used with a bit more creative thinking.

Ross Greer talked about the importance of nature and the outdoors. I mentioned the trial in Edinburgh. There and in a number of other areas, we are looking at collaborative approaches. For example, the University of Aberdeen recently ran a scheme alongside the wee green spaces project that gave children opportunities to use the university's botanic gardens as a place in which to play and explore. There are good examples out there, and we want to encourage such collaboration.

I have run over time, but I hope that I managed to mention everyone. I realise that I am preventing Jeremy Balfour from getting away to play with his children, and I had better not hold him up further. I hope that the other members who are here will join the individuals in the gallery at the reception later, as we continue to celebrate play and emphasise its importance to the children of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

That concludes the debate. Our visitors may show their appreciation now, if they wish to do so.
[Applause.]

Meeting closed at 18:06.

Note

Find more about Scotland's Play Charter and how to become a Play Champion at www.playscotland.org

