



Play

Part of the City of Kitchener's Parks Master Plan



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Related sections

Places

Spaces

Community Health & Wellness
Natural Spaces & Climate Adaptation
Park Amenities
Park Design Approach
Splashpads
Sports & Games

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A scenic view of a pond with reeds and a forest under a blue sky, seen from a wooden deck. The foreground shows the wooden planks of the deck and a railing. The middle ground is filled with tall reeds in the water. The background is a dense forest of green trees under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. The sun is shining brightly from the upper right, creating a lens flare effect.

Acknowledgement

Places & Spaces is focused on the park service provided to the Kitchener community. Parks and open spaces are integral to communities, providing spaces where people play, explore, and build connections with the environment and with others.

The City is uniquely positioned to provide, care for, maintain, and secure public access to parks and open spaces for all members of its communities. The City of Kitchener recognizes that these public spaces are planned and built on land that is the traditional territory of the Chonnonton, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Peoples. We recognize our responsibility to serve as stewards for the land and honour the original caretakers who came before us. Our community is enriched by the enduring knowledge and deep-rooted traditions of the diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Kitchener today. The significance of this land to Indigenous communities is respected, and we value the role that parks and open spaces can play in Reconciliation.

The City of Kitchener acts as a steward for almost 2,000 hectares of land as part of a parks and open space system. Through the implementation of Places & Spaces, we will work to better understand and address community needs and the barriers preventing use of these spaces, so that all community members in Kitchener might feel welcome, safe, and able to use our parks and open spaces.



Introduction

This section focuses on the background information and specific details that inform the context for the recommendations made for this topic.

Background

What is play?

Play and fun are cognitive and social needs for everyone of all ages and abilities and support a person's health, growth, and well-being over their lifetime. Play can be enjoyed through physical movement, working through a challenge, and building social connections with others. Many factors in a person's life can influence their experience of play.

City parks and open spaces can encourage playful experiences for everyone by enabling a balance of active and passive uses. In the past, play experiences in Kitchener have typically been geared to young children and have relied on traditional playgrounds and open grassed fields for organized or informal sports. This approach has served a limited group of Kitchener residents. Through this Parks Master Plan, the City will explore other ways of introducing playful experiences in parks and open spaces for all ages and abilities in new and renovated parks.

Current playground inventory

For decades, the City has focused on the number of traditional playgrounds in parks and open spaces. When a park was created in Kitchener, it almost always included a small playground and a few benches surrounding that playground.

The result is that many of the city's playgrounds today, particularly in older areas of the city, look similar, and are very close to one another – often less than 500 m apart. Kitchener currently has approximately 150 traditional playground sites across the city. The 2010 Park Strategic Plan set a target of having one neighbourhood park or playground within a five-minute walking distance (400-500 m) of every residence to support equal access to neighbourhood parks. This remains the objective the City is working towards.

Traditional playgrounds often include play structures and other manufactured play pieces in a defined area with an approved play safety surface. These playgrounds generally serve a narrow segment of the population, children aged 18 months to 12 years old and their caregivers. Playgrounds require routine inspections to assess their safety and on-

going preventative maintenance and upkeep to meet the standards outlined by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) and City standards.

As part of their routine maintenance, traditional playgrounds all over the city need upgrades or replacements caused by regular wear and tear. A playground's life cycle can vary, but is generally expected to last from 15 to 25 years without major repairs or replacements. Playground condition is evaluated regularly through a routine inspection process when staff assess the safety of the equipment and complete any necessary repairs to maintain the equipment in safe condition. The condition of the playground inventory in Kitchener is dynamic as minor issues can be repaired or parts replaced. When repair or new parts are no longer options, the entire playground might be replaced as part of a larger park renovation. Supporting infrastructure such as seating, tables, shade, ramps, and accessible surfacing help create an enjoyable and accessible playground experience for children and their caregivers. Many playgrounds in Kitchener often have little of this supporting infrastructure to contribute to a comfortable experience.

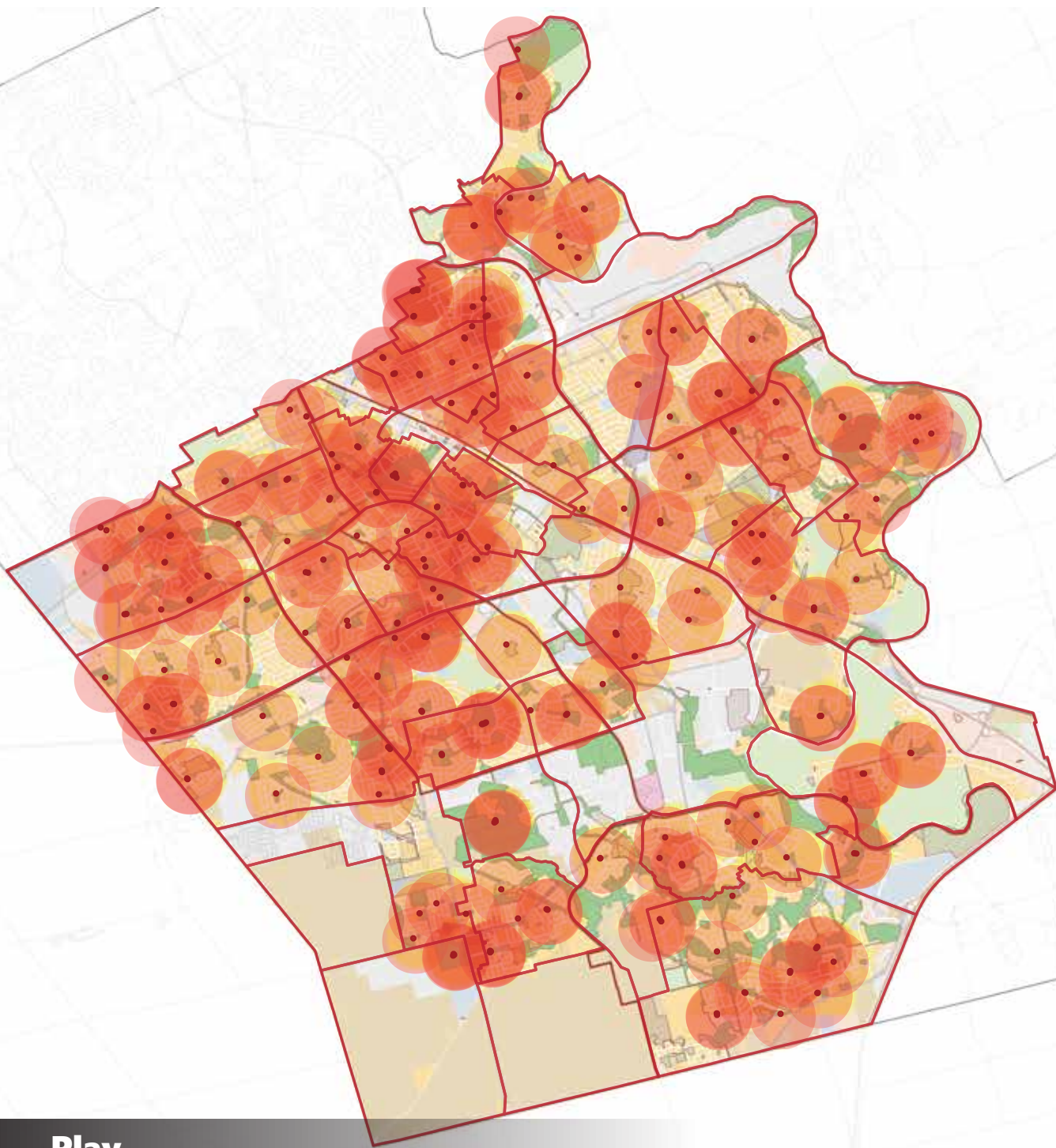
Select playgrounds and parks are upgraded with Council-approved budgets each year through two streams: park renovations or standalone replacement when a full park renovation is not planned within the next ten years. The City of Kitchener currently completes three to five playground replacements annually. There is a need to increase the playground replacement rate to meaningfully address the backlog of existing playgrounds past their life cycle. The current approach often reactively directs funding to the most obvious problems with little long-term planning to respond to evolving needs and trends.

Exercise equipment inventory


Fitness equipment in parks is gaining in popularity as a low-cost option to support movement and physical activity for adults. Outdoor fitness equipment is a relatively new addition to Kitchener parks. The City recently supported the installation of several outdoor fitness equipment areas. Some of these projects were community-led through grants and partner funding. Staff continue to collect feedback and data about their use, maintenance and operation, style of equipment, and appropriateness of locations for this type of amenity.



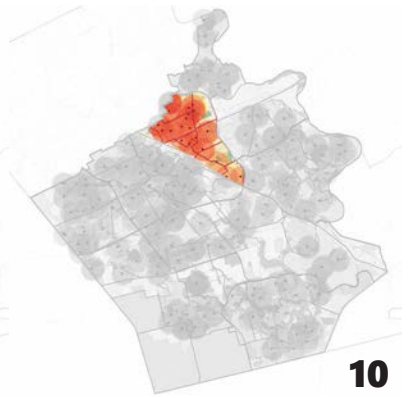
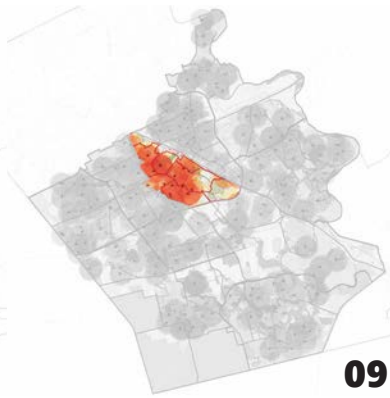
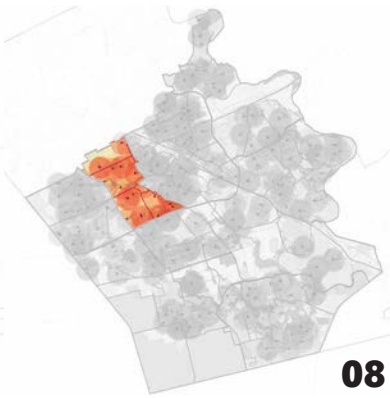
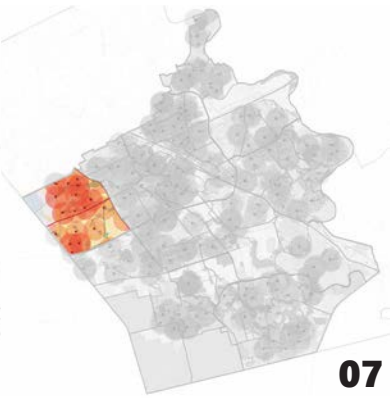
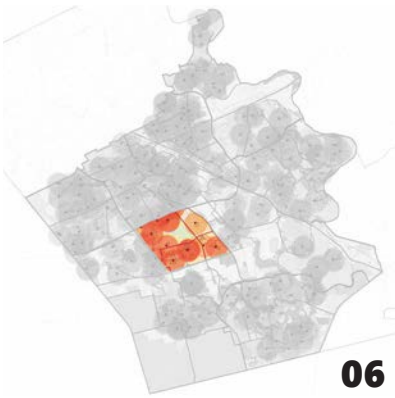
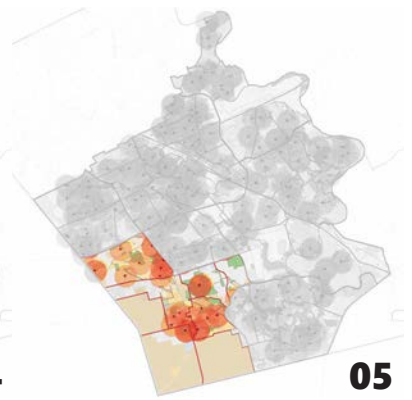
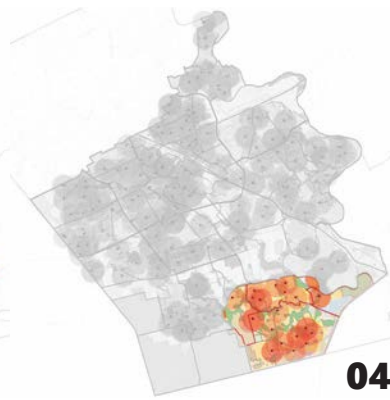
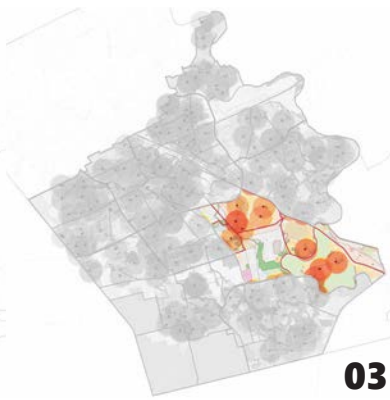
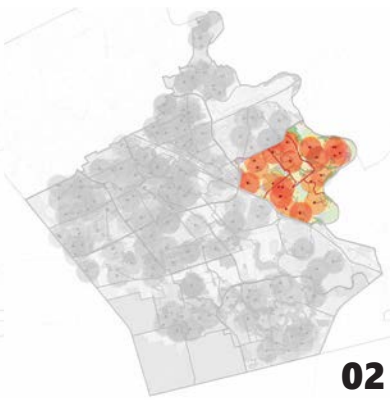
Playground distribution 2024



Legend:

-  Playground with 500m buffer. More intense colour indicates a greater number of overlapping buffers.

Playground distribution by ward





Data Sources

This section highlights the relevant sources of information and research used to develop recommendations for this topic. A total of 12 data sources, including engagement, have informed the Parks Master Plan recommendations. For more detailed information on each data source, please refer to the Places booklet.



Legislation



Equitable engagement



Engagement with the broader community



Engagement with City of Kitchener departments



Engagement with partner organizations



Comparative analysis



External research



Policy



City of Kitchener strategies



Region of Waterloo strategies



Best practices



City of Kitchener staff experience



Findings

Several themes emerged across topic areas, engagement audiences, and data collection methods. The following section reflects major themes that cut across several datasets from engagement methods. Findings relevant to more than one theme are reflected in each. For more detailed information on the overall engagement effort, please refer to the Places booklet.

Accessibility

Access to park spaces and amenities and the accessibility of those spaces and amenities arose as a key theme across topics and datasets. A lack of accessible and safe play spaces was highlighted as a barrier to feeling welcome in parks.

Engagement data highlighted there is not enough accessible play equipment, especially for people who use wheelchairs and people with sensory processing disorders and neurodivergent conditions.

The disability community is largely left out of park design. It is improving with new parks, but accessibility needs to be prioritized/properly funded.

“

I feel unwelcome because my daughter has a physical disability, and she cannot play on the playgrounds. At best there is a single accessible swing. I feel like families like us do not belong/are not wanted in the park because no one considered disabled people when the parks were designed. The play structures keep us out. I don't feel like anyone expected/wanted people like us to be there.

”

More accessible play equipment at a greater number of parks is key to enabling participation in playful experiences of parks.

Ensure accessibility of shaded areas, and that shade is provided over spaces to sit and rest, including benches with backs and picnic tables.

Sensory-friendly play spaces support inclusion for people with special needs.

A desire for more accessible equipment including height-adjusted swings, more accessible baby swings, and equipment to support self-regulation was heard through engagement

The importance of maintenance is confirmed as a key factor in the accessibility of play experiences.



Inclusion

The engagement data highlighted a wide understanding of what play means to residents in a park, which includes playgrounds, play structures, opportunities to meet and play with other people, and use of open fields, forested areas and hills or slopes. Respondents most often described their current play in parks and how they used to play in parks when they were young in a similar way. This includes enjoying nature and naturalized spaces, trails and picnic areas, having places to sit and socialize, especially in the shade, and playing on play structures including slides, swings, and climbing structures.

When respondents were young, methods of play also included the use of imagination in games. Some ways that children and youth might have enhanced experiences in park spaces include play opportunities to promote imagination, taking risks, social skills and social connection.

People shared ideas regarding how spaces might be created where older adults and older youth can play. Responses ranged from adding more equipment to parks, to requesting more natural space to explore, to

increasing opportunities to interact with people and with art.

- Additional equipment such as paved paths, obstacle courses, climbing, seating or skate parks.
- More natural areas and open spaces with looped trails and shade.
- Opportunities for interactivity such as interactive art or creative spaces, pop-up play spaces for play or vendors, and spaces to play board games, table games, or cultural games with tutorials.
- Including larger equipment for bigger bodies.



Sensory-friendly, this includes special needs swings and secured parks.



Adding playground equipment, particularly swings, and places to sit down were common requests from youth for neighbourhood parks, while older adults value having enough seating and gathering options with shade in parks and open spaces. Unstructured play elements create opportunities for fun and play for all ages and abilities.

The value of play equipment and activities for all ages emerged as a key theme through engagement. More spaces to play close to home are important aspects of inclusion. Overall, spaces to play contribute to community connectedness.

Environmental sustainability

Engagement data suggested when it comes to naturalization, nature is part of a play experience. Respondents value spaces to explore, walk, enjoy, connect, and play outdoors. Respondents would like to see more natural play equipment and natural play spaces, shade over play equipment, near public transit stops, and as a climate change mitigation measure.

Health and wellbeing

Play equipment and activities for all ages, more seating and gathering areas, and shade surfaced as important considerations to promote health and well-being in parks and open spaces. Enough spaces to play contribute to improved and maintained health and wellness.

Information

Sharing information about what amenities are available in each park to support planning park visits. Space to play board games including cultural games with tutorials.

Safety

Regular maintenance of park amenities is an important aspect of safety. Many factors contributing to accessibility also contribute to safety.

Adding fencing around play spaces for children who may need play boundaries supports the safety of children and their caregivers.

Partnerships

The value of exploring partnerships with school boards and neighbourhood associations, and promoting grant opportunities for residents to contribute to play in Kitchener where possible surfaced through engagement.



Recommendations

This section summarizes the recommendations specific to this topic that are informed by the broad and local context, data sources, and findings. Each recommendation begins with a number representing the order in which its implementation is prioritized. For a comprehensive list of all recommendations made for this master plan update and the implementation framework, please refer to the Places booklet.

The future of play in Kitchener parks and open spaces

The benefits of play beyond traditional playgrounds have not been well explored in Kitchener's parks and open spaces. While there remains value in conventional playground experiences, the idea that a traditional playground meets all play needs in parks must be examined. By promoting a philosophy of play that provides opportunities for enjoyment and connection for all ages and abilities, more Kitchener residents can experience joy, fun and community in their local parks.



Plan whole play spaces

Resource new and renovated playground projects to provide suitable play experiences and supporting amenities such as seating, shade, playground curbing, and barrier-free infrastructure that support play, caregiving, and maintenance activities.

At a minimum, playground renovation budgets should cover necessary amenities to support the enjoyment of traditional playgrounds for both children and their caregivers, account for accessibility requirements, and ensure the optimization of maintenance activities. Well placed shade and seating are important amenities as they allow for park users to extend their park visits. There are two main factors which influence and inform park amenities within Kitchener's parks and open spaces; engagement and the provisional guidelines as highlighted in the Park Amenities booklet.

Playground amenities that support the comfort and enjoyment of caregivers:

- Benches or seating
- Shade structures or sails

- Picnic tables
- Trees

Playground requirements that enable accessibility:

- Entry/exit ramp in each playground.
- Barrier-free paths of travel with appropriate minimum clearances, a stable accessible surface and smooth ground plane transitions.
- Accessible surfacing such as engineered wood fiber or rubberized material.

Playground design that supports maintenance:

- Curbs to maintain and monitor a consistent minimum engineered wood fiber surface depth for shock absorption.
- Sub-surface drainage to protect the longevity of the playground.
- Trail and entrance with drop curb for improved maintenance vehicle access.

Faster playground replacement

Resource a sustained increase in the playground replacement rate at priority locations to address the current backlog.

The current playground replacement rate is not fast enough to meaningfully update an aging inventory. The rate of replacement should be increased and resourced with appropriate budgets to fund a playground experience in alignment with the park classification, including supporting amenities to offer a complete and accessible playground area that can be well maintained. Supporting amenities that include but are not limited to seating options, shade, barrier-free paths of travel, curbing, and drainage. Locations prioritized for replacement should be informed by the playground inventory evaluation. Accessible play elements are included in all new and renovated playgrounds, however, engagement with the local community can be used to further inform design. Where possible, opportunities to partner with schools and neighbourhood associations, and community grant programs should be explored.

06: Change the way we play

Establish play design standards for new and renovated parks that describe fun and play for all ages and abilities, and that allow a responsive approach to evolving local and broader trends.

Traditional playgrounds provide play experiences for ages 18 months to 12 years old, often separated into two distinct structures for ages 18 months to 5 years, and for ages 5-12 years. They provide a valuable resource for children and families during an important time of cognitive growth. Cognitive and developmental needs for all ages and abilities including fun, problem-solving, and socialization can also be met through alternative opportunities beyond traditional playgrounds. Gaps exist for youth older than 12 years, adults, and older adults. By including opportunities for play and fun experiences for all ages and abilities, and a variety of body types and sizes, more of Kitchener's residents can find value and have playful experiences in parks and open spaces.

The City will consider alternative play options that meet safety standards and are operations- and maintenance-conscious. Refer to appendix for play design standards.

13: Match playgrounds to their parks

Establish standards for traditional playground size and complexity in alignment with park size and classification.

Investments in playground size and complexity must align with Planned Park classification levels. By establishing a standard approach, service levels will be consistent across park classifications in each ward.

Decisions made about the size or complexity of playgrounds will be directly related to a park's classification.

15: Evaluate the playground inventory

Establish data-informed evaluation criteria to create a playground inventory management plan. Invest resources into increasing the size and improving the quality of traditional playgrounds at strategic locations and consolidating playgrounds where supported by engagement.

A balance of active and passive programming in park spaces is needed to support all park visitors. Unique and complementary play options can be spread across a network of complementary neighbourhood park experiences. The city needs to strategically support future management of the current playground inventory in a meaningful and sustainable way. It is recommended to evaluate the current playground inventory to formalize two streams to inform funding needed to increase the playground improvement and replacement rate.

Stream 1: Strategic playground placement in a network of parks in close proximity that each offer a variety of complementary play experiences:

- Where multiple playground areas exist in one park, consider combining smaller traditional playgrounds into one, larger strategically placed playground.
- Select one park to meet the playground need and match playground investment to park classification as much as possible.
- Minimize overlap between traditional playgrounds (e.g., at least 500 m apart).
- Where there is significant overlap, explore non-playground options to enable other playful experiences.
- Prioritize replacement in residential areas in the city with fewer playgrounds.
- Provide a variety of complementary park and play experiences for all ages and abilities across a park network.
- Continue to leverage partnership opportunities with local schools and neighbourhood associations and promote community grant programs.

Stream 2: Standalone playground replacement:

- Where a park renovation is not identified within the next ten years, identify select playgrounds to be replaced at a similar size and play value with supporting amenities such as seating, shade, playground curbing, and barrier-free infrastructure that support play, caregiving, and maintenance activities.
- Continue to leverage partnership opportunities with local schools and neighbourhood associations and promote community grant programs.

For both the development and formalization of the two improvement streams above, the playground inventory and evaluation will be informed by community engagement and neighbourhood analysis.

24: Consider exercise equipment in parks

Monitor existing exercise equipment locations for usage rates to determine if infrastructure should be expanded.

Kitchener has begun to install outdoor fitness equipment, but its use and demand are not well understood nor documented. To better understand the needs and use of outdoor fitness equipment, the current inventory, and its use, should be assessed and evaluated.

32: Rubberized surfacing in each ward

Identify and resource one playground per ward to receive rubberized surfacing in a location with greatest access in the community.

While engineered wood fiber is generally accepted as an accessible play safety surface, engagement on the subject highlighted that rubberized surfacing is more accessible and is preferred as an accessible surface. The cost of rubberized play surfacing is significantly higher than that of engineered wood fiber. To meet the need for more accessible playgrounds, at a minimum, one playground per ward should be identified to receive rubberized safety surfacing as part of a playground replacement or park renovation project. These locations should be situated to enable greatest access for the community, such as near a community center or library, near a washroom facility, on a public transit route, and with adequate parking.



A low-angle photograph of a modern playground structure featuring several tall, vertical, light-colored poles. Three children are climbing the poles: one on the left in a white hoodie, one in the center in a yellow shirt, and one on the right in a dark shirt. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The text 'Appendix: Play Design Standards' is overlaid in white on a dark horizontal band across the middle of the image.

Appendix: **Play Design Standards**

Opportunities for fun and play for all ages and abilities can be met through a variety of creative design options. The following highlight some, but not all of the play opportunities that can be integrated into public parks and open spaces:

Ground play experiences

- Painted games
- Bike tracks
- Stepping stones
- Tactile surfaces, embedded rocks, varying textures
- Ground-plane murals
- Sand with play archaeology



Places to socialize

- Stepped seating
- Moveable furnishings
- Long picnic tables
- Imaginative play
- Open unprogrammed areas
- Game tables such as chess or ping pong
- Shared or group swings



Grade changes

- Tunnels
- Mounds
- Terracing
- Earthworks and grade changes
- Ramps



Sensory experiences

- Plantings
- Surface textures
- Water tables and runnels
- Musical play equipment
- Light or colour reflections

Connection to nature

- Naturalization
- Seating near habitat for observation
- Rain gardens
- Bird houses near naturalized areas
- Lookouts and boardwalks
- Wildflower or pollinator gardens





Places to exercise

- Trail loops, connections to the trail network
- Outdoor exercise equipment
- Parcour-type equipment

Places for individuals

- Individual seating opportunities for quiet contemplation
- Sensory calming elements
- Rest areas
- Bench seating and informal seating



Places to play games

- Places to play board games and table games
- Cultural games with information and tutorials
- Painted games
- Basketball and other court sports

Places for unstructured activities

- Open fields
- Walking trails, connections to the trail network



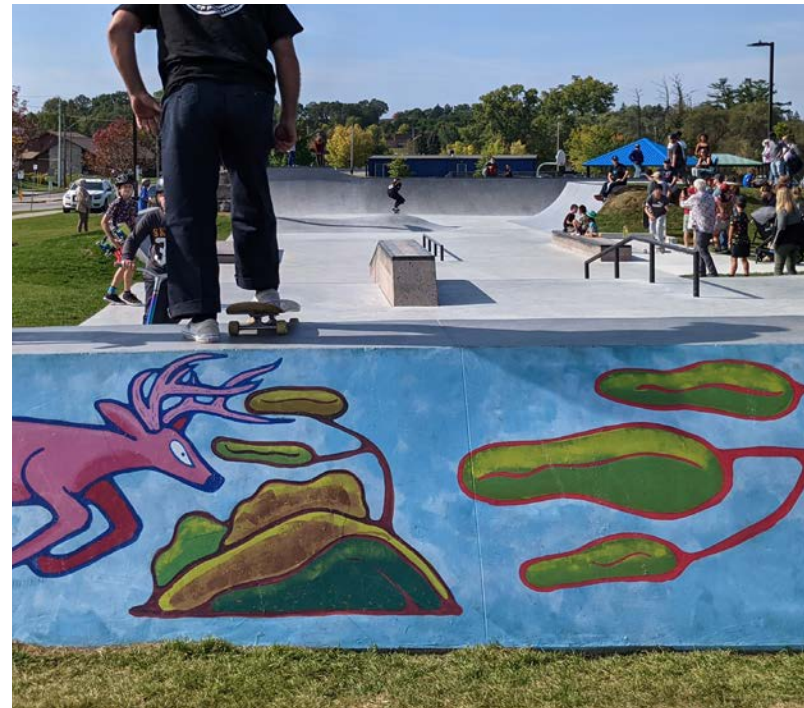
Places for creative expression

- Small amphitheaters or informal entertainment spaces
- Places for interacting with or creating art
- Temporary, or pop-up play experiences



Alternate approaches to fun

To encourage people of all ages to use Kitchener park spaces, they must be designed to be inviting for a variety of ages, abilities, and interests. Parks may include fitness equipment, walking trails, or more passive recreation opportunities to attract park users. Park programming may respond to specific to community needs where extensive engagement has taken place. This makes certain that immediate community needs are being fulfilled.





Recommendations summary



Faster playground replacement

Resource a sustained increase in the playground replacement rate at priority locations to address the current backlog.



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