PLAY POLICY

Outdoor Play and Learning

Date reviewed	July 2026
Date next due for renewal	September 2028
Governors approved	September 2026
Policy owner	OPAL / Curricular Lead for Play

Learning at Stivichall is a passport for life

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Policy status This policy applies to all pupils, employees, volunteers, governors, visitors and contractors whose work may affect children's play provision.

1. Purpose and commitment

“Play is essential for children’s well-being and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the aim is not to eliminate risk but to balance risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.” (Health and Safety Executive, 2012)

Stivichall Primary School recognises play as an essential part of a happy, healthy childhood and a right under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We will refer to this policy whenever decisions affect children’s play and will provide the strategic and operational leadership needed to develop, resource and maintain high-quality play provision for every child.

The school has invested in the OPAL Primary Programme as a framework for improving play. Our intention is that every child experiences an amazing playtime every day through a broad range of accessible, enjoyable, creative and challenging opportunities.

2. Rationale

Play is sometimes treated as an unimportant break from learning or valued only when it produces an adult-defined outcome. Over-direction can reduce children’s freedom to imagine, negotiate, create and manage uncertainty. At the same time, opportunities for self-directed outdoor play beyond school have declined because of traffic, limited access to space, busy family lives and concerns about community safety.

School playtimes therefore have particular importance. A risk-averse “cotton-wool” culture can unintentionally restrict physical activity, independence, confidence and resilience. Stivichall adopts a balanced, “safe enough” approach: adults protect children from unreasonable risks of serious harm while recognising the developmental value of uncertainty, challenge and age-appropriate risk-taking.

- Children have freedom to engage with uncertainty and challenge.
- Adults create a relaxed atmosphere and support play without unnecessarily controlling it.
- Children’s natural risk-taking is recognised as a route to confidence, resilience and risk competence.

3. Definition and value of play

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child describes play as behaviour, activity or a process initiated, controlled and structured by children. It is non-compulsory, intrinsically motivated and undertaken for its own sake. Adults may create the conditions for play, but the child retains meaningful choice over what, how, where and with whom they play.

Play may or may not involve equipment or other people. It is self-directed, flexible and often imaginative. It provides joy, freedom, friendship, exploration and a space in which children can test ideas, abilities and relationships.

What children told us

- Play is fun.
- They want a wide range of things to play with, including opportunities for wheeled play and climbing.
- Everyone should be able to play in ways that are valuable to them.
- They value staff support when it helps their play.

Characteristics and benefits of play

- Personal control – children make meaningful choices and play retains spontaneity.
- Intrinsic motivation – play is driven by enjoyment, curiosity and interest rather than reward.
- Social connection – play supports attachment, communication, negotiation, cooperation and empathy.
- Emotional resonance – children encounter and process excitement, frustration, acceptance, rejection, fear and achievement.
- Flexibility and creativity – play changes as children adapt, solve problems, invent and respond to others.
- Imagination and pretence – children explore actions, roles and ideas in imagined ways.
- Novelty and uncertainty – appropriate challenge supports confidence, judgement and risk perception.

Together, these features support physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development; self-esteem; openness to learning; creativity; friendship; resilience and well-being.

4. Aims and children's rights

Stivichall recognises children's right to play, rest, recreation and leisure (UNCRC Article 31) and their right to have their views considered in matters that affect them (Article 12). We will listen to children and act on their ideas where reasonably practicable.

In relation to play, the school aims to:

- provide varied, stimulating and challenging environments;
- enable children to choose, create, adapt and lead their play;
- offer acceptable risks and use a common-sense risk-benefit approach;
- support relationships, kindness, communication, independence and teamwork;
- help children respect other people, resources and the environment;
- provide opportunities for imaginative, physical, social, creative, quiet and sensory play;
- promote physical and emotional health, confidence, resilience and enjoyment;
- ensure play is welcoming, accessible and responsive to the needs of every child.

5. Equality, inclusion and accessibility

The play offer will be inclusive and accessible irrespective of age, sex, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, disability, special educational need, sexual orientation, family circumstances or socio-economic background. The school will anticipate and remove barriers where reasonably practicable, make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils and ensure that difference is respected.

Inclusion does not mean that every child must use identical resources or receive identical adult support. Staff may adapt spaces, communication, equipment, routines, supervision or access so that children can participate meaningfully and safely. Children who need help to enter, sustain or leave play will be supported sensitively without adults taking unnecessary control.

Inclusive practice The starting point is always: "How can this child take part?" Any restriction must be necessary, proportionate, time-limited and reviewed.

6. Providing for play

So far as is reasonably practicable, children will have freedom of movement across the school grounds and access to varied environments. Mixed-age and mixed-ability play is valued. Children may be out of an adult's direct sight for short periods when the environment, supervision arrangements and children's needs make this appropriate; adults will remain available and will range through the site.

Children should be enabled to control what, where, with whom and how they play. The guiding principle is that everyone has a right to play: children may play in ways that are valuable to them provided this does not unreasonably prevent others from doing the same or expose anyone to a foreseeable risk of serious harm.

Environment and loose parts

The school will continually improve the quality and diversity of its grounds. Children will have access to a generous variety of loose parts, natural resources and open-ended materials that can be transported, combined, redesigned and used imaginatively. Resources will reflect a balanced play offer, including active, creative, social, quiet, sensory and nature-based opportunities.

Play spaces and storage will be organised to encourage independence. Children will be involved in preparing environments, using resources responsibly and returning equipment. Normal wear, mess and change are expected features of rich play; this does not remove the need for proportionate inspection, maintenance and good housekeeping.

Access to play

Playtime will not routinely be withdrawn as a punishment or used to complete classwork. Access may be restricted only where a child's behaviour creates an unreasonable and immediate risk to themselves or

others, or where a short, proportionate intervention is required under the Behaviour Policy. Any restriction will be the minimum necessary, and staff will plan how the child can be supported to return to successful play.

7. Benefit and risk

Risk describes uncertain outcomes and can include both harm and benefit. Balancing on a wall, for example, can carry a risk of injury while also offering excitement, physical competence, confidence, risk perception and a sense of achievement.

The school follows the Health and Safety Executive statement Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach and adopts risk-benefit assessment in line with play-sector guidance. The aim is not to eliminate risk, but to protect children from unacceptable risks of serious harm while preserving the benefits of challenging play.

Relevant duties arise particularly from the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 and the Occupiers' Liability Acts 1957 and 1984. Decisions will be reasonable, proportionate and based on sensible professional judgement.

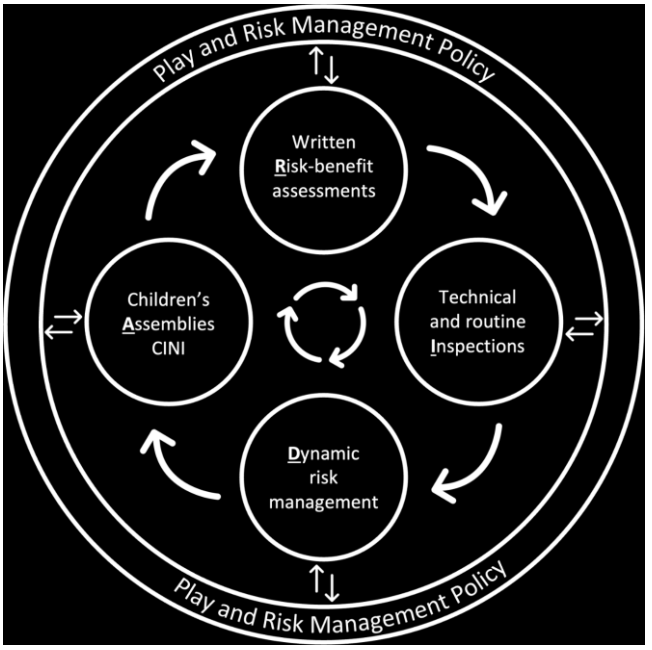
When deciding whether an opportunity is acceptable, staff will consider:

- the likely play, developmental, social and emotional benefits;
- who may be harmed, the likelihood of harm and its possible severity;
- children's ages, abilities, experience and capacity to recognise and manage the risk;
- site conditions, weather, supervision, equipment and relevant guidance;
- whether proportionate controls can reduce serious risk without removing the play value;
- the negative effect that restriction would have on children's play.

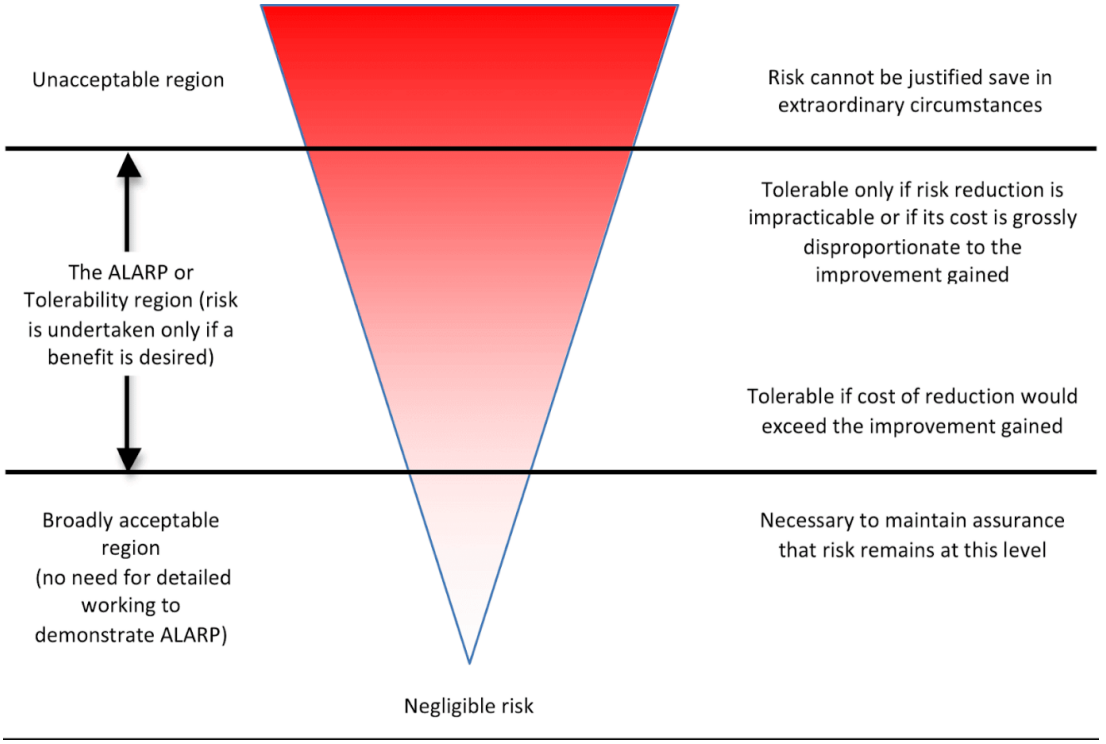
Core principle Children should encounter acceptable risks within a stimulating, challenging and managed play environment. Adults should support children to identify and manage risk rather than automatically removing every uncertainty.

8. Strategic risk management

Risk management is an ongoing process informed by OPAL's R.A.P.I.D. model: Risk-benefit assessments, Assemblies, Policy, Inspections and Dynamic risk management. These elements work together to maintain a "safe enough" environment and consistent decision-making.



Detailed written assessments are not required for every ordinary play scenario. The school uses a proportionate approach: commonplace, low-risk play is covered by this overarching policy and staff judgement, while activities or features presenting heightened or unfamiliar risks receive closer assessment.



When a written risk-benefit assessment is required

A written assessment will normally be completed where an environmental feature or opportunity falls beyond the broadly acceptable region, including where:

- a structure, site feature or impact surface falls outside commonly accepted standards;
- adult action introduces a greater risk than children would ordinarily choose for themselves;
- staff are uncertain about the risks or controls;
- additional justification is prudent because the activity is novel, complex or may be misunderstood;
- children repeatedly create a heightened-risk opportunity so that it has become a routine feature of play.

Assessments will identify benefits, hazards, those who may be harmed, proportionate controls, ownership and review arrangements. They will be reviewed following significant change, an accident or near miss, emerging evidence, or experience that shows controls are ineffective or unnecessarily restrictive.

9. Dynamic risk-benefit assessment

Because children's play is flexible and exploratory, unplanned risks can emerge in real time. Staff will assess the whole context, observe children's management of the situation where it is safe to do so, and choose the least intrusive response that keeps risk at a reasonable level.

Staff should consider:

- Are children recognising the hazard, adapting their behaviour or creating their own workable rules?
- Do age, experience, ability, group dynamics, weather or site conditions change the balance?
- Could a prompt, question, repositioning of equipment, added supervision or a small control preserve the play?
- Is there an imminent and serious risk that requires the activity to stop immediately?

Significant or recurring dynamic decisions will be shared with the OPAL Lead/Play Coordinator and, where appropriate, incorporated into written assessments, assemblies, supervision plans or staff training.

10. Good and bad hazards

An acceptable or "good" hazard is one that children can reasonably perceive and that offers worthwhile play benefits when navigated. These hazards are managed so that risks remain reasonable. An unreasonable or "bad" hazard is hidden, difficult for children to recognise, or presents a high risk of serious harm with little or no play benefit. Such hazards will be removed, isolated, repaired or otherwise controlled.

11. Inspection, maintenance and resources

The school will maintain proportionate inspection and maintenance systems. Responsibilities and frequencies will be recorded locally and may vary according to the feature or resource. Arrangements include:

- daily or pre-use visual checks of key areas and obvious hazards;
- scheduled checks of loose parts and storage, with unsafe items removed from use;
- periodic, more detailed checks of structures, fixings, moving parts, surfaces, drainage, boundaries, ground and natural features;
- annual competent inspection of relevant fixed or engineered equipment and, where required, trees or self-built structures;
- prompt reporting, isolation, repair or removal of unreasonable hazards;
- records of significant checks, defects, action and completion.

The Play Team (lunchtime supervisors) will support children to care for resources and pack away appropriately. The Play Coordinator will monitor supply, condition, storage and replenishment, drawing on purchasing, donations and community support. Donated items will be checked before release into play.

12. Supervision of playtimes

Children will be suitably and sufficiently supervised. There is no fixed statutory adult-to-child ratio for primary-school playtimes; staffing will reflect the size and layout of the site, pupils' ages and needs, available activities, known risks and any individual plans.

Stivichall uses OPAL's direct, remote and ranging models of supervision. Direct supervision may be appropriate for children new to the site, particular needs or specific higher-risk opportunities. Remote and ranging supervision allow children meaningful freedom while ensuring they can quickly find an adult and adults maintain awareness across a large site.

The grounds will be divided into supervision zones with adults actively ranging through allocated areas. A floating member of staff will support oversight and respond where needed. Staff will use agreed communication arrangements, including walkie-talkies where provided, and a clearly identified first-aid point. Deployment may be adjusted dynamically in response to conditions and emerging play.

13. The adult's role in play

Adults supervising play are the Play Team (lunchtime supervisors). Their core function is to create and sustain conditions in which children can direct their own play. Staff will work in accordance with the Playwork Principles and receive opportunities to reflect on and improve their practice.

The Play Team will:

- be active, curious, approachable and encouraging;
- range through the site and use the agreed supervision model;
- observe before intervening and avoid interrupting valuable play unnecessarily;
- model possibilities, kindness and inclusive play without taking over;
- join play when invited and withdraw sensitively when no longer needed;
- use conversation and questions to develop language, negotiation and risk awareness;
- help children enter play, resolve difficulties and repair relationships;
- notice environmental change, complete visual checks and report unreasonable hazards;
- support children to set up, care for and pack away resources;
- follow safeguarding, behaviour, first-aid and incident-reporting procedures.

Adults recognise that children's play can appear untidy, noisy, repetitive or apparently purposeless. Intervention will be based on the balance of benefit and risk, children's rights and the effect on others—not simply adult preference.

14. Safeguarding, behaviour, incidents and first aid

Safeguarding

The school's safeguarding and child protection procedures apply at all times. Adults will maintain professional curiosity, respond to disclosures, concerns or unsafe adult/child behaviour, and report concerns to a Designated Safeguarding Lead without delay. Supervision arrangements will account for boundaries, visitors, vulnerable locations and children with individual safety plans. Unauthorised visitors will be challenged or reported in accordance with school procedures.

Behaviour and relationships

The Behaviour Policy applies during play. Adults will distinguish between developmentally normal play conflict, which children may be able to negotiate with proportionate support, and bullying, discrimination, coercion, targeted harm or dangerous behaviour, which require intervention and recording. Restorative approaches may be used where appropriate. Consequences must not routinely remove a child's right to play.

Accidents, near misses and first aid

First aid will be provided by trained staff under the school's First Aid/Medical Needs procedures. All first-aid treatment and accidents will be recorded on Medical Tracker and communicated to parents/carers in line with school procedures. Significant near misses, equipment failures and medical concerns will also be passed promptly to the relevant lead and recorded through the appropriate school system. Serious incidents will be escalated immediately. Relevant incidents will inform inspection, risk-benefit assessment, supervision and resource decisions; reporting must be used to learn and improve, not to create unnecessary restrictions after every minor injury.

Children needing additional support

Where a child's needs or behaviour affect safe access to play, staff will plan proportionate support with the child, family and relevant professionals. Individual plans will preserve choice and independence as far as possible and will be reviewed regularly.

15. Weather, clothing and site access

The school intends children to play outdoors in most weather. Families are expected to provide appropriate coats and footwear/wellies in line with school arrangements, and the school will provide suitable storage. Access to areas may change because of extreme weather, ground damage or an identified unreasonable hazard, but mud, light rain, ordinary cold and manageable wet conditions are not by themselves reasons to remove outdoor play.

In hot weather, icy conditions, storms or other extremes, leaders will consider forecasts and live site conditions, shade, hydration, clothing, surfaces, falling branches and any public-health advice. Controls will be proportionate and communicated to staff and children.

16. Leadership, governance and accountability

Headteacher and senior leaders

- ensure the policy is implemented and aligned with safeguarding, health and safety, behaviour, inclusion and curriculum priorities;
- provide appropriate staffing, time, resources and professional development;
- ensure significant risks, incidents and progress are reported to governors.

Curricular / OPAL Lead for Play

- drive the strategic development of play and maintain the Play Action Plan;
- include relevant play priorities within school improvement planning;
- monitor play provision, pupil experience and impact, including regular observations;
- support and develop the Play Coordinator and Play Team;

- coordinate risk-benefit documentation with site, premises and business-management colleagues;
- oversee resourcing, budget planning, grants and donations;
- lead C.I.N.I. play assemblies and embed pupil voice;
- report progress to senior leaders, governors and the OPAL working group.

Play Coordinator

- support inclusive, child-initiated play in accordance with this policy;
- observe play regularly, identify strengths and priorities, and feedback to the OPAL Lead;
- support appropriate intervention, referral, first-aid and incident-recording processes;
- complete or coordinate loose-parts and environmental checks allocated to the role;
- maintain a varied supply of safe-enough resources and organise replenishment;
- seek and act on children's views;
- coach staff and pupils in playwork practice;
- support pupil-led play initiatives and enriching play opportunities;
- raise emerging risks, maintenance needs and required assessment updates promptly.

Play Team

All staff supervising play are accountable for active supervision, dynamic risk-benefit decisions, inclusive practice, safeguarding, incident response and the expectations in section 13. Staff must attend required training and raise concerns or improvement ideas.

Governor responsible for play

- monitor implementation and evaluate the quality and inclusivity of provision;
- visit playtimes periodically and seek pupil and staff views;
- support and challenge leaders on progress, resources and risk management;
- report relevant updates to the governing body and help develop community links.

Parent Play Champion

- represent parent perspectives within the OPAL working group;
- help families understand the school's play approach and risk-benefit philosophy;
- advocate for children's play and support appropriate community resourcing;
- share ideas, feedback and possible local partnerships.

OPAL working group

The working group will normally include the OPAL Lead, Play Coordinator, Headteacher or nominated senior leader, governor responsible for play and Parent Play Champion, with other staff or pupils invited as appropriate. It will meet at least termly during implementation and thereafter at a frequency agreed by leaders. It will review the action plan, evidence, risk management, pupil and community feedback, resources and allocated actions.

17. Pupil, parent and community involvement

Children's voice is central to the development of provision. The school will use observation, informal dialogue, pupil groups, surveys and play assemblies to understand what children value and what needs improvement. C.I.N.I. assemblies will Celebrate play, Inform children, Negotiate shared expectations and Innovate with children, and will routinely include risk-management learning.

Parents and carers will be helped to understand the school's approach through communication, consultation and opportunities to observe or participate where appropriate. Community contributions, donations and partnerships are welcomed when they support the policy and can be safely stored, checked and sustained.

18. Monitoring, training and review

The OPAL Lead will monitor implementation through playtime observations, pupil voice, staff feedback, participation and inclusion, accident and incident information, inspection records, resource audits and

progress against the Play Action Plan. Evidence will be considered in context; success is not judged solely by the absence of minor injuries.

The Play Team will receive induction and ongoing development in playwork, supervision, dynamic risk-benefit assessment, inclusion, safeguarding, first aid and relevant school procedures. Training completion will be recorded. Significant learning will be shared promptly and reinforced through meetings and assemblies.

This policy will be reviewed by the date shown on the cover, or earlier following significant changes to the site or provision, updated guidance or legislation, a serious incident, evidence that arrangements are ineffective, or an OPAL review. The governing body will approve material revisions.

Key guidance and legal framework

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 12 and 31.
- Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.
- Occupiers' Liability Acts 1957 and 1984.
- Equality Act 2010.
- Health and Safety Executive: Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach (2012).
- Play Safety Forum: Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (2012).
- ISO 4980:2023 – Benefit and risk assessment for sports and recreational facilities, activities and equipment.
- OPAL Primary Programme materials, including R.A.P.I.D., C.I.N.I. and supervision models.
- Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group: The Playwork Principles (2005).

Current versions of external guidance should be consulted alongside this policy. Where legislation or statutory guidance changes, the current requirement takes precedence.

Appendix 1: The Playwork Principles

The Playwork Principles provide the professional and ethical framework for playwork. In summary, they recognise children's innate need and capacity to play; describe play as freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated; and require adults to support the play process, understand its impact on children and reflect on their own intervention. Staff should consult the published principles in full during training and practice development.

Appendix 2: OPAL leadership structure

Role	Primary accountability
Governing body	Oversight, approval and strategic challenge.
Headteacher / SLT	Accountability, resourcing and alignment with whole-school duties.
Curricular / OPAL Lead	Strategy, action plan, monitoring, training and reporting.
Play Coordinator	Operational development, resources, checks, coaching and pupil voice.
Play Team	Daily supervision, facilitation, dynamic assessment and response.
Parent Play Champion	Family voice, advocacy and community support.
OPAL working group	Collective review, consultation and action tracking.

Appendix 3: Dynamic risk-benefit decision guide

1. Observe – Pause where safe. Understand the play, the children's intentions and the context.

2. Balance – Identify the likely benefits, hazards, likelihood and possible severity of harm.

3. Notice children's competence – Are children recognising, discussing or managing the risk themselves?

4. Choose the least intrusive response – Continue observing, ask a question, offer information, add a proportionate control or reposition support.

5. Stop only when necessary – Intervene immediately where serious harm is imminent or the risk is unreasonable.

6. Learn and record – Share recurring or significant issues and update assessments, training, assemblies or resources where needed.

Related school policies and records

- Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- Health and Safety Policy
- Behaviour Policy and Anti-Bullying Policy
- Equality information/objectives and SEND/Inclusion policies
- First Aid / Supporting Pupils with Medical Conditions procedures and Medical Tracker records
- Educational Visits and Outdoor Learning procedures, where relevant
- Site security, visitor and emergency procedures
- Risk-benefit assessments, inspection logs and maintenance records
- Play Action Plan, training tracker and OPAL working-group records

Version control

Date	Version	Amendments / comments	Reviewer
July 2026	V1	Original Stivichall play policy.	RG
September 2026	V2	Expanded using comparative policy review; corrected contents; added aims, inclusion, operational roles, safeguarding, incidents and review arrangements.	CW