

Public space lessons

Designing and planning for play



A new era of design thinking is encouraging more creativity in the design of play environments. With a boost of £235m of government investment, local authorities can make the most of this opportunity by drawing on best practice and providing imaginative, more natural play spaces that meet the needs of the wider community

‘The investment is down to wider government policy. It is a response to concerns about the quality of childhood’

A new agenda for play

Play is a very serious business for young people. It’s intrinsic to a healthy childhood. High-quality play provision offers a route to fitness that is fun. For families, it offers a safe location for meeting with friends. Perhaps most of all, well-designed play space helps make young people happy in, and with, their local neighbourhoods.

Now, new government funding means that local authorities have a unique chance to transform the quality of their play spaces. Over the next three years, the government will invest more money than ever before in children’s play. Councils need to grasp this opportunity to

deliver the best facilities possible, capitalising on growing trends such as natural play and play beyond the playground.

This latest move began in December 2007, when the secretary of state for children, schools and families, Ed Balls, announced a 10-year children’s plan. As part of this, £235m is to be made available for the upgrading of 3,500 existing playgrounds, and 30 local authorities will each receive around £2m to build new, supervised adventure playgrounds — play areas, both indoor and outdoor, that are open access and staffed by qualified play workers. Earlier this year, when the government launched its national play strategy, *Fair Play*, it selected 20 pathfinders and 43 ‘playbuilders’ to be the first local authorities to receive a share of the £235m.

But this was not the first stage in a UK-wide recognition of the importance of play. The government had already shown that it was taking the issue of children’s play

seriously in 2004 with its *Every Child Matters* agenda, and a review in the same year by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) showed how £155m of Big Lottery money could be spent ‘to improve more children’s lives through play’. Some of that cash is funding Play England for five years and going towards funding play workers and facilities.

There are other opportunities, especially in improving the play value of school grounds or through investment programmes in under-fives and primary provision. Building Schools for the Future, the £45bn government programme that will rebuild or refurbish every one of England’s 3,500 state secondary schools, recognises the value of school grounds in improving learning environments.

For one play expert, Tim Gill, the next few years represent an opportunity to transform the quality of play spaces across the UK. ‘The amount of real money going into play is really remarkable, almost from a standing start’. Gill believes the investment is down to wider government policy; it is ‘a response to concerns about the quality of childhood and broad anxiety over the quality of children’s lives such as obesity’.

Play spaces need to be integrated into the wider public realm and are not the preserve of just one profession. Depending on the local context, planners, park managers and transport professionals, as well as play workers, may need to be involved in decisions about future play provision. Following the



With play design, creativity should be encouraged, enhanced by an understanding of the history of the site

HELLE NEBELONG

Case study 1

Play happens everywhere — Vauban, Germany

There is an increasing realisation that play does not just take place in designated play spaces, but in the whole environment that a child occupies. Future city planning needs to recognise that providing a fenced-off play space in the middle of a housing estate is not adequate — the whole estate should be playable. Vauban, an 'eco-district' on the edge of Freiburg in Germany, has achieved this. The scheme is built on the site of a former military base in the south of the city. The neighbourhood was designed to be practically car-free, with 40 per cent of residents not owning a car and car owners parking in 'solar garages' on the edge of the development.



SAMI PARRY

There are some roads, with a 5km/h speed limit — but the majority of the outside space is given over to green, child-friendly playable space. Because so much of Vauban is car-free, planners were able to create green open space where those roads would usually be. There are no set play areas: play happens everywhere. There is a sandpit here,

a climbing rock there, and a swing hidden behind trees. By removing the boundary between garden/street/park/play area, children have a far wider choice of spaces in which to play. The approach is underpinned by a belief that play should be free and undirected by adults. Creating play spaces defined by adults, with play equipment designed by adults, significantly diminishes the ability for the child to use their imagination. By contrast, the safe environment created in Vauban enables children to access play spaces freely on their own — and to decide where they want to go and what they want to do. Under 'Planning for play' on p4, we look at how this car-free approach could be replicated in Britain, where the car dominates so many cities. Exemplar schemes could show the way, for instance in the designs for eco-towns.

thinking and best practice in this briefing paper, all those involved in the design and planning for play are encouraged to take a much more holistic, imaginative and collaborative approach.

The state of play

For decades, bland and unimaginative environments have resulted from the way that play spaces have been procured, and from a lack of attention to design. Play spaces tend to look much like each other, no matter where they are in the country, primarily because equipment comes from a small number of manufacturers, and those companies often 'design' the play spaces, too.

Fencing originally installed to keep dogs out, for example, is often in reality more about keeping children in. Some play experts, including Gill, believe that a

'Local authority over-reliance on the catalogue leads to the 'KFC' playground — kit, fence, and carpet'

disproportionate amount of money spent on playgrounds goes on safety surfacing, to the detriment of other facilities. 'The vast majority of playgrounds built in the UK are not well designed,' he argues. 'They are formulaic and are not grounded in what children actually like to do when they go out to play. There is an overemphasis on brightly coloured equipment, an over-preoccupation with safety and far too little thought and time paid to making them playful, interesting places that adults will want to spend time in, as well as children.'

In part, this is because of the local authority 'syndrome' of over-

reliance on the catalogue, or what is sometimes known as the 'KFC' playground — kit, fence, and carpet. The Playlink leisure consultancy, which works in design, planning, strategy and local engagement, considers this to be a failure of the market, with providers and local authorities' procurement processes leading to dull, unimaginative playgrounds.

The issue of risk is a recurrent one. CABA Space research has found that over-sensitivity to risk has stifled the design of rich and stimulating environments¹. Pressures to minimise risk and liability in the public realm can lead to authorities 'playing it safe', resulting in standardised spaces that fail to delight, educate or offer young people the opportunity to meet or socialise.

¹ *Living with risk: promoting better public space design*, CABA, 2007

Planning for play

It is important that local authorities plan for play provision. Whether planning to refurbish or develop a play area, or to improve play space across a neighbourhood, local authorities should include play provision in their strategic plans for public space. This strategic thinking should be underpinned by an agreed play policy.

Play does not and should not only happen in playgrounds, so authorities need to consider how to create a more child-friendly public realm overall. Local authorities' play strategies should therefore ensure that there is a range of accessible play options across an area. Play areas can be in parks, squares and even on streets, where initiatives such as home zones make for safer play on streets directly outside houses. The Department for Transport's *Manual for Streets*² identifies streets themselves as key

elements of place-making. Providing a mix of play spaces around streets, such as pocket parks, helps them become places, rather than just thoroughfares.

Exemplar schemes could show the way, for instance in the designs for the new eco-towns. Play partnerships, which have been set up to deliver comprehensive play strategies funded by the Big Lottery Fund, need to continue to steer and co-ordinate this kind of strategic approach. Strategies should consider planning, design and management of play opportunities, and bring play workers together with planners and park managers to ensure a joined-up approach across the local authority area. Play England and the Big Lottery Fund's *Planning for play: guidance on the development and implementation of a local play strategy* explains how to develop, implement and sustain an effective local play strategy. This can help to access and protect

budgets for design, management and maintenance of play space by confirming levels of provision and need.

Play strategies should be linked to open space strategies and local standards for play should be set in accordance with *Planning policy guidance note 17 (PPG 17): planning for open space, sport and recreation*³. This sets out how local authorities should assess the existing and future needs of their communities for open space, sport and recreation facilities. This assessment should form the basis of an open space strategy that sets out a local authority's vision for its open spaces and how that will be achieved. Play also needs to be embedded in local development frameworks to maximise the opportunities to improve play through new developments.

² See www.manualforstreets.org.uk

³ See tinyurl.com/3aqkfn

Designing for play

When it comes to design, creativity should be encouraged. It will be helped by an understanding of the characteristics and history of the site, to establish a sense of place and relate to what is there already. A skilled designer, most likely a landscape architect, should lead the process, supplemented with additional expertise, such as from a play expert or structural engineer. To help authorities select these personnel, the Children's Play Information Service (CPIS) has compiled a list of independent play designers and landscape architects who design play spaces and school grounds. Details can be found on the CPIS website: www.ncb.org.uk/cpis.

Public artists can also add richness to a project, and art installations



Natural play encourages children's creativity, allowing them to take appropriate risks to learn their boundaries

JANE KNIGHT/FEDEN PROJECT

Case study 2

Children aid strategic thinking — Birmingham

Birmingham has put children at the centre of improving its play provision. The city's council has adopted the National Youth Agency's 'Hear by Right' standards as the measure for the active involvement of children and young people. In 2004, the council formed a multi-agency partnership to develop a play policy and strategy for the city. In 2007, CAFE Space and Play England helped the local authority to develop a play strategy, resulting in a £3.3m grant from the Big Lottery Fund allocated to play.

In developing the play strategy, the council identified gaps in provision by auditing the provision, use and quality of play and cross-referencing this to numbers of children in constituency areas. A play strategy partnership identified two key themes for improving play opportunities in Birmingham: a co-ordinated, citywide programme aimed at developing and promoting play in public spaces — particularly parks — and a constituency programme aimed at developing and enhancing local play facilities. Initial difficulties over constituencies developing realistic proposals, because of a lack of technical knowledge and legislation, were overcome by support from CAFE Space and partners. Four years on,

the partnership still meets regularly. Big Lottery funding is being used effectively to achieve an action plan containing some 86 targets. Fundamental to the success of play in Birmingham is the delivery of play to children from diverse backgrounds and work with a range of partners in both voluntary and statutory sectors. The approach has made a significant difference to play for children, particularly in deprived areas of the city. The city council's £3.3m award, the largest single award nationally, has funded free, inclusive play in local open spaces, five centre-based projects including creative playpods, play centres and a youth café. Play rangers have also been appointed.

can sometimes offer children more play value than equipment. Public art works best when integrated from the outset and public artists can work alongside other consultants extremely effectively.

Back to nature

Natural play is growing in popularity in the UK. Groundwork Trusts and the Forestry Commission, for example, are both delivering interesting projects in this area. Natural play spaces contain playful landscape elements including landform, vegetation and natural elements such as logs, stones, mud and sand. Research studies have documented the benefits that can come from natural play, including for children's learning, healthy growth and development. This year the Forestry Commission is publishing *Nature play: simple and fun ideas for all*, an illustrative guide that provides ideas for local forest managers to implement in their nature play areas. Many of the ideas in the guide can equally

be applied to urban areas. The guide encourages the use of locally sourced materials and construction by local crafts people. Groundwork Playscape is a balanced design approach to traditional playground design and natural play. The concept encourages children to be active and creative, allowing them to take appropriate risks to learn their boundaries and valuable, lifelong lessons. For more details visit www.groundwork-playscape.org.uk.

Children prefer natural environments to play in as these help develop all types of play. In contrast to man-made environments, a natural setting can create more imaginative play and so prevent the dominance of a hierarchy based on physical strength that encourages bullying.

Much of the momentum behind natural play design originates in Denmark, Holland, and Germany. These countries offer important examples of how to create well-designed, thoughtful play spaces. Danish landscape architect and play

design champion Helle Nebelong believes that, by contrast to natural play spaces, standardised play equipment can actually be dangerous. As Nebelong explained at the 2007 CAFE Space leaders programme: 'Play becomes simplistic, and children no longer have to think about their movement. The ability to concentrate on estimated distance, height and risks needs practice. And the playground is where that practising should begin.'

Play expert Tim Gill believes that these countries are getting it right primarily because landscape architects enjoy a much closer involvement in the process. The starting point is a holistic look at the site, rather than at what pieces of equipment should be bought.

In addition, those countries have not become as pre-occupied with safety as the UK, even though their facilities meet the required European standards.

10 principles for designing play

*Design for Play: a guide to creating successful play spaces*⁴ published in August by Play England, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and DCMS. It provides ideas and practical resources for building new play spaces in a fresher and more inspiring manner. The guide, supported by CAFE Space, advocates a fresh design-led approach to commissioning, based on 10 principles and encapsulated in one golden rule: a successful play space is a place in its own right, specially designed for its location, in such a way as to provide as much play value as possible. The rules ask practitioners to imagine a play space that is:



The Eden Project's Mud Between Your Toes initiative creates opportunities for young people to get out more and reconnect with the natural world in their community

1 Designed to enhance its setting — successful play spaces are designed to fit their surroundings and enhance the local environment, complementing attractive spaces and enhancing poorer environments.

2 Located in the best possible place — successful play spaces are located carefully 'to be where children would play naturally'. While children often enjoy feeling as if they are away from adult view, there is a fine balance between a space that is pleasantly secluded and one that is remote and hidden away.

3 Close to nature — grassy mounds, planting, logs and boulders can all help to make a more attractive and playable setting for equipment, and planting can also help attract birds and other wildlife to bring the play space to life.

⁴ Free to download from the Play England website: www.playengland.org.uk

4 Designed so that children can play in different ways — successful play spaces can be used in different ways by children and young people of different ages and interests; they can also be important social spaces for parents and carers, as well as for children.

5 Geared towards encouraging disabled and able-bodied children to play together — children with different abilities can play together in well-designed play spaces, and parents and carers who are themselves disabled should be able to gain access to play spaces if they are to accompany their children.

6 Loved by the community — a successful community engagement process will help create a site that the community likes and which meets its needs. (CAFE Space's *What would you do with this space?* offers constructive ways to involve children in public space design. See p7 for details.)

7 Where children of all ages play together — good play spaces avoid segregating children based on age or ability and are laid out so that equipment and features can be used by a wide range of children.

8 Designed to enable children to stretch and challenge themselves in every way — Children and young people need opportunities to experience challenge and excitement in their play.

9 Maintained for play value and environmental sustainability — good play spaces are designed and constructed using sustainable materials and maintained to encourage different play experiences.

10 Flexible and able to evolve as the children grow — Building some 'slack space' into the layout — areas with no predefined function — can help introduce the potential for change and evolution.

Community involvement

For the first time ever, the government will be assessing local authority performance on play by introducing a play indicator — NI199 — in 2009/10. This means that every year, children and young people will be asked how satisfied they are with their local play areas and parks. This underlines the importance of consultation for play and the need to engage with the community in a realistic and meaningful way.

CABE Space's Spaceshaper is a practical tool to help achieve this. Spaceshaper helps assess the quality of a public space by bringing those who use a space together with those who manage it. A facilitated workshop involves a site visit and structured and constructive dialogue between users and professionals on the strengths and weaknesses of a space, and where the priorities for change lie. CABE Space is working with partners to develop a version of the tool specifically for children and young people. To find out more, visit: www.cabe.org.uk/spaceshaper.

In addition, CABE Space guidance, *What would you do with this space?* explores creative and constructive ways to involve children and young people in public space and sets out some of the key issues that projects may face. A selection of the following case studies is available on the CABE website via www.cabe.org.uk/casestudies:

- Cowley Teenage Space, Brixton, London
- Evergreen Adventure Playground, Hackney, London
- Freemantle Pavilion, Southampton
- SPACEmakers, Bristol
- Faelledparken and Valbyparken, Copenhagen.

Managing play

Those responsible for the management of new spaces should be involved at the outset of the design and implementation stage. This can help them to develop an understanding of the approach to the design of the play space and ensure that the designer takes account of the maintenance implications.

Adequate resourcing for maintenance also needs to be considered from the outset. Specific issues that might need addressing include managing and maintaining different types of surfacing, vegetation, equipment and fencing. A more naturalistic approach to play will need a maintenance regime that focuses on landscape, rather than equipment inspection.

A strategic approach to managing resources is needed to ensure they remain valued and protected in the long term. One solution that could work is, as play consultant Sue Gutteridge experienced in Stirling, Scotland, to have a dedicated team for play areas as part of children's services. Each site was treated as



Children should be at the heart of planning

a place in its own right, and the person responsible for the play areas was responsible for staff, too. 'That meant the starting point was the users of the space,' she says.

Conclusion

It is clear that play provision in England is at a crossroads. The country is better placed than ever before to transform the quality of new and existing play spaces, with new government funding, design guidance and a new national indicator. Over the next three years, England's local authorities face a great challenge to deliver the national play strategy by enriching our public spaces with the upgrade of 3,500 play areas. But if this is done strategically, creatively and without undue fear of risk, this could represent a pinnacle for the design of public space in England.

To get there, local authorities should be creative and brave in taking the national play strategy forward. They need to take a much more holistic, imaginative and collaborative approach to the design of play space, led by professionals with the appropriate range of skills, knowledge and experience. This will enable a radical shift away from those 'KFC' playgrounds, which fail to provide a sense of place, to a more naturalistic approach that will provide rich and stimulating play spaces, reflecting local site characteristics and need.

Children should be put at the heart of the planning and design of public space for play, aided by practitioners with a wide variety of skillset.

Ultimately, it will be by integrating more playable spaces into the public realm that a more child-friendly environment can be created — one that also meets the needs of the wider community.

Play is a hugely important part of physical and emotional development. But years of neglect in both design and investment have left many communities with limited, banal and standardised facilities. Now, with £235m of government funding coming on stream, there is a real opportunity to get the next generation of play spaces right and to be more strategic about the options for play in every area. This briefing from CAFE Space highlights best practice in design and strategy and urges greater use of creative, natural play spaces. It is aimed not only at those working directly in the design and management of play facilities, but at anyone working in public spaces in towns and cities.

Further information

DCSF/DCMS *Fair Play* consultation:
www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/fairplay

Play England: the national support body for local authorities delivering the government's play pathfinder and playbuilder programme: www.playengland.org.uk

The Big Lottery Fund's projects and grant awards:
www.biglotteryfund.org.uk

National Children's Bureau promotes the voices, interests and well-being of children and young people:
www.ncb.org.uk

The Children's Play Information Service (CPIS): the national library on children's play, based at the National Children's Bureau: www.ncb.org.uk/cpis.

The Free Play Network: charity dedicated to improving children's opportunities for outdoor play:
www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk

Groundwork: federation of trusts working to improve the quality of the local environment: www.groundwork.org.uk

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As a public body, CAFE encourages policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission projects that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places. CAFE Space is a specialist unit within CAFE that aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.

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