

In Praise of Playgrounds

Thoughts on the Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play Programme

Andy Furze
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The Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play Programme has created exciting possibilities for children's play, which will hopefully stimulate greater interest and awareness of children's play in local authorities across the country. The "Planning for Play" guidance document on producing play strategies has some excellent suggestions and comments: yet it is also interesting for what it chooses not to say.

Put simply, the document largely ignores the roles and benefits of play equipment. There isn't a single photo of manufactured play equipment in the document; and no discussion of its uses. Quite rightly, the document urges local authorities to think beyond simple play equipment:

"it is important to recognise the diversity, complexity, and richness of children's play. Recognising this level of variety and complexity is helpful when planning for play as it helps us think beyond play equipment and kick-around pitches"ⁱ

"play is about much more than swings and roundabouts in the park. Fixed equipment playgrounds have their place. But a good play strategy will take a much broader view of where and how often children need access to the space and opportunity to run, climb, skip, hide, play with ropes, jump, practise cartwheels, throw and kick balls, make friends, fall out, build fires, grow things, tell stories, climb trees, take risks, get wet, explore nature, build dens, get dirty, dress up, pretend, keep animals, dig holes, swing on tyres, shout, fight, invent games, make things, paint pictures, talk with their friends or just sit. Many of these activities lend themselves more suitably to supervised play provision"ⁱⁱ

and goes on to argue the case for encouraging play in the natural environment.

As someone who was responsible for children's play and parks in a unitary council for over ten years, I have great sympathy for these sentiments. In that time we started play schemes, introduced (via the local voluntary play network) play containers as the bases for play work, consulted children widely, developed a "design a space" scheme modelled on the work of the Learning through Landscapes Trust, introduced mounds, planting and sand to provide environmental play opportunities, introduced meeting shelters, ball parks and skate-parks, and created an extremely successful family park, which has a two thirds acre sandpit at its centre. But – like I suspect many

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other local authority officers – I saw play equipment as central to the development of children’s play opportunities, and was always keen to improve playgrounds whenever the (financial) opportunity presented itself. So: was I wrong, or has the planning for Play guidance unfairly neglected the potential and uses of play equipment?

Myths and Misunderstandings about children’s playgrounds

There are many assumptions about play equipment that have become repeated so frequently that they have taken on the appearance of “truth” – but frequently they are not substantiated by evidence.

Rob Whewey has, for the Child Accident Prevention Trust, helpfully listed out ten popular “urban myths” about children’s playgroundsⁱⁱⁱ:

**1) “*Playground equipment is less exciting than it used to be.*
*Wrong; it’s more exciting and adventurous nowadays”.***

Rob goes on to say that although some equipment that was proven to be dangerous, such as the witch’s hat, has disappeared, manufacturers have made determined efforts to increase the play value of equipment. I cannot claim such a long experience in play as Rob, but I would entirely agree: play manufacturers have responded to the safety campaigns of the late 1980s and the uncertainty created by the introduction of new standards by re-thinking their play ranges, so that the equipment on the market now is far more interesting and more varied than it was in the past.

**2) “*Children use playgrounds less because the playgrounds are boring.*
*Wrong: Playgrounds are still popular play places.”***

Rob makes the point – and this has been well documented in both the work of Hillman etc on children’s mobility in 1990^{iv} and by his own studies published in 1997^v that the reasons many playgrounds are less well used is because the distance that children are allowed to travel unaccompanied has reduced dramatically, largely because of restrictions imposed by parents because of the dangers of traffic. My own observations in Thurrock were that playgrounds were still hugely popular in some situations: particularly if they were on a route to or from school, or where access was considered safe.

**3) “*Children don’t use playgrounds much.*
*Wrong: They use playgrounds a lot”***

Rob goes on to explain: “Where a playground is in the right location it will be highly used. A good location is where they can “see and be seen” by a trusted adult...and “where it’s at” where there is a high probability that other people will pass by or through. Children tend to stay at any one place for a relatively short period of time but will keep returning to a popular place. A playground in a poor location, even with good equipment,

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is likely to have low usage and be vulnerable". Again, simple observation shows time after time that good sites are successful.

**4) "Parents want safe playground equipment for their children
Wrong: they want exciting playgrounds."**

Rob explains that this myth is based on a misunderstanding of parent's responses. Parents will often say "they want a safe place where children can play". When asked in more detail, what emerges is that parents want somewhere that is socially safe – somewhere where they can keep an eye on them – but they also frequently say that local playgrounds are not exciting enough and ask for more exciting equipment.

**5) "All the safety surfacing has made the playgrounds less exciting for children.
Wrong; if anything they've made them more exciting"**

There was nothing exciting about falling on to concrete or tarmac. The more modern coloured rubber surfacing has added to the play value and interest of sites, and where sand has been used as the surface it has added greatly to the interest and play value of the site.

**6) "European legislation has banned exciting playground equipment
Wrong: There is no European (or British) legislation for playground equipment"**

Rob makes the point that the European standard is advisory only, and that it is in any case more adventurous than the old British standard. There is now a greater understanding of the importance of risk in play, and the need to balance risk and safety when providing for children, so that local authorities can now take a more adventurous approach to play where they can demonstrate, through their risk assessment, that the play and social value (e.g. reduction in anti-social behaviour) of the equipment justifies the risk of injury involved^{vi}.

**7) "The European Standard prevents manufacturers from designing exciting equipment.
Wrong: it doesn't."**

A visit to the annual SALTEX show in Windsor, when leading manufacturers show off their new products, will confirm this: there is now a greater range of dynamic and exciting equipment than at any time in recent history.

**8) "Climbing frames are dangerous.
Wrong; It's a misunderstanding of the evidence".**

Many play areas now have a large "multi-play item". As a large item, incorporating several play features, there is more use of them and hence more minor bumps and scrapes; these accidents are often then recorded as being on the "climbing frame" which is the popular name for the multi

play units. This reminds me of the fact that my department was once congratulated, not criticized, by the council's safety officer for the massive increase in the number of accidents we reported. This arose because we had just opened a major staffed family park at Grays Beach; every time the staff stuck a plaster on a child's grazed knee the accident was recorded, hence the rise. The reality was that the increase in accidents simply showed the huge success and popularity of the site, not that the site was in any way unsafe.

9) "Local authorities have to make playgrounds safe because they are often sued.

Wrong: they are being sued less"

Rob states that the demand for reports from expert witnesses has fallen, indicating a reduction in claims. Whether this is true would probably need checking with the insurance companies, but it is certainly the case that a local authority that properly manages its play areas has nothing to fear. Once we had established proper, documented inspection regimes we never lost a case – and to be fair not many people tried to claim. However I did find that quoting the danger of being sued was always a powerful argument when needing to make the case for money for maintenance – and as I ensured the budget was headed "maintenance and improvements" I was always, somehow, able to find money to improve sites!

10) "You can't let children play out because of stranger danger.

Wrong: We know it's not strangers who pose the risks".

Rob makes the point that we now know that it is people the children know who pose the greater risk, so our fear of strangers should have decreased. While this may be logical, I think we have to take account of people's perceptions of reality: in practice many parents and children do limit their children's freedom of movement not just because of traffic, but also because of the risks from adults. I think we need to recognise this in the design of our play areas, which, however well sited, still need seats etc for parents and carers, and need a range of equipment so that the older children who are sent out to keep an eye on their younger siblings or cousins can also find something to interest them.

In addition to Rob Wheway's ten myths, Tim Gill (the former Director of the Children's Play Council) has added some of his own. His first three duplicate those of Rob Wheway, but his fourth is a new one:

11) "Conventional playgrounds are cheaper"

Tim states: "naturalistic play spaces, we are told, cost more to design and build than off the shelf playgrounds. Also untrue. In the southern German town of Freiburg the municipality has for over a decade been replacing conventional playgrounds with more naturalistic spaces. The new-style playgrounds cost half as much to install as their fixed play equivalents, while running costs are about the same".^{vii}

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I'm not sure this is a myth at all – it's certainly not one I've ever heard before. But what works in southern Germany will not necessarily work in parts of Britain, with a different climate, topography, and culture – including of course vandalism. There is a danger that in trying to make the case for natural areas – which I entirely support – we unfairly denigrate the role and benefits of equipped play areas. I will come onto the need to try to integrate the best of both later in this paper.

Finally, if eleven myths are not enough, there is a danger that the Planning for Play guidance will create a twelfth:

12)“Family Parks don't meet everyday play needs of local children”.

“Destination or showcase parks are sometimes seen as the solution to the need for more play provision, and the popularity of large town parks with quality equipment is clear. However research shows that the majority of users are on a family visit, and that they do not meet the everyday play needs of more than small numbers of local children.”^{viii}

While I'm sure this is true of some such parks, this is a question of location and design. If a family park is easily and safely accessible from a community with large numbers of children, and includes areas and equipment that are attractive to children from about 8 upwards, then it will attract unsupervised local children – particularly in the late afternoon when the family groups have gone home.

The Roles and benefits of play equipment

What these myths illustrate is a significant misunderstanding of the roles and benefits of play equipment. I do not intend to list out all the benefits of play in general ^{ix} but it is worth pointing out that play equipment has a number of roles and benefits:

1) To provide play and recreation opportunities.

It's always worth stating the obvious! Quite clearly equipment provides a range of play opportunities for children; it is important to remember that even 'old fashioned' equipment is successful:

“traditional play equipment is boring for adults to provide, but remains new to successive generations of children” ^x

Different types of equipment can facilitate different types of play: e.g. “equipment that can be changed or altered encourages co-operative behaviour” ^{xi}

It should not be forgotten that many children, particularly in deprived communities, still do not have an annual holiday away from home; for them a major destination park such as Grays Beach provides them with an alternative.

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The release of energy associated with vigorous play, whether on equipment or not, helps with problems of behaviour, as well of course as having health benefits.

2) To provide a destination for children to go to.(empowers children)

This is a very important function of equipped play areas, a point uncovered particularly by the research of Rob Wheway and Alison Millward^{xii}. Their research also puts into context the often quoted, but rather misleading, research that children only stay on play areas, on average, for 21 minutes. (This is often used as a criticism of play equipment. However, most park visitors only visited a park for about thirty minutes, so why is twenty-one minutes on play equipment regarded as a short time?)^{xiii}. What Wheway and Millward observed was that:

“The most predominant key activity that children were involved in was what we defined as ‘going’. We found that between 31 per cent and 58 per cent of the observations on every estate were of children who were walking, cycling or occasionally roller skating, purposefully in a definite direction”^{xiv}

and that play areas were extremely important in this context as ‘places to go to’:

“While children did express preferences for places to play, both in describing their favourite places and what facilities would improve their areas, our observations show that the children did not necessarily spend long periods in those places. This is not to suggest that these places are unimportant for children. Their answers clearly indicate that play areas and parks for instance are very important.

What is important for children is to be able to move freely around their physical and social environment and have a variety of inter-actions at different locations.”^{xv}

Their research confirms the findings of Robin Moore ten years earlier: “Through observation and conversation it became clear that a brightly painted collection of play equipment often provided the initial pretext for a park visit. It served as a rendezvous and punctuation point for peer inter-action, allowing time for friends to gather (after school for instance) and make plans about what to do. The games and joking behaviour stimulated by play equipment went spinning off into play sequences extending deeper into the park or neighbourhood territory”^{xvi}

3) In particular, to provide a chance for girls to get out.

This is important. Studies have consistently shown that girls are more restricted in where they are allowed to go out, so it is even more important for them to have an identifiable destination to receive

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permission to go out and move about the environment.^{xvii} Play equipment provides such a destination that is recognised and accepted by many parents.^{xviii} Unfortunately, despite the play value of natural spaces, fears of sexual predators limit their use, particularly by girls, whereas equipped areas are seen as safer places to be. While Rob Whewey has correctly identified this as a low risk (see myth 10 above), we have to deal with the perceived risk that determines the reality of how parents allow girls to access the environment.

4) To provide a destination for parents, grandparents and carers to take children to.

Adults sometimes need an excuse to get out as well! In terms of users of parks, accompanying a child was second only to going for a walk in terms of visitors in the surveys conducted in Cardiff and Southwark^{xix}: “many park users regard themselves a ‘surrogate’ users: their main reason for using the park is to bring their children or grandchildren”.^{xx}

5) To legitimise a space for play.

Society has become so conditioned to the idea that children should be confined to certain areas, that it is now helpful to show where play is allowed: “a minor piece of sympathetic play equipment...will tell children and adults ‘here is a place which belongs to children’”.^{xxi}

It is also very difficult to ensure “natural” environments are seen as safe: “a major, but not inevitable, conflict seems to exist between the provision of an atmosphere which is perceived as safe and the creation or preservation of areas that people find mostly attractive. The evidence is that sometimes a sense of safety and a sense of wilderness can co-exist, but it is not clear what environmental cues are needed”.^{xxii} It is possible in some cases that play equipment could indicate that an area is valued for children, so that their playing would then be seen to be an acceptable use of that space (instead of being regarded as vandalizing a wildlife area).

6) To provide a place for play in the winter.

While snow, puddles and fallen leaves can all provide new play experiences, in practice many natural areas become unattractive to children in the winter. There is a world of difference between the environment under fir trees on a sandy soil, which will stay soft all year, and that on a clay soil under deciduous trees – which can vary from an unappealing bog in winter to being as hard as concrete in the summer. Interestingly, Brentwood Council did try to create a boggy area in its King Georges Fields Play ground to give children a different play experience, but this was the only part of the site that proved unsuccessful.

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In contrast, play equipment can be used throughout the year, so is particularly valuable in encouraging children and families to go out when they might otherwise stay indoors.

7) Play equipment can give children a sense of achievement.

Whether it is going the entire length of the monkey bars for the first time, or reaching the top of a climbing rope, “children need environments where they can reach that stage of excitement and confidence to exclaim ‘look at what I can do’”^{xxiii} and “all children – including young ones – have a right to the fascinating feeling of being courageous, of achieving something difficult”^{xxiv}

8) Play equipment can give children the opportunity to practice skills.

This is an aspect of play where equipment is usually more useful than natural alternatives:

“Large items of equipment can help to develop gross motor skills – the building blocks for fine tuning. Studies of movement patterns demonstrate how co-ordination increases with constant practice and recurrent use of playground equipment.”

And

“through the use of equipment which is, for example, unpredictable, the child is helped to develop spatial and visual perception.”^{xxv}

Practise is recognised as essential in any sport, but it is just as essential for young children.

9) Play equipment can reduce anti-social behaviour in an area.

Research has shown that “increasing the quantity of equipment results in less ‘undesirable’ behaviour”.^{xxvi} We also found that equipment, shelters and facilities such as ball courts and skate parks, aimed at older children, could achieve significant changes in anti-social behaviour, principally in drawing young people away from “hanging around” near shops and flats where they caused conflict with residents, and instead staying on open spaces where their behaviour could be absorbed without causing conflict. One particularly successful scheme, In South Ockendon, resulted in this message from the group of residents living in the flats above the pedestrianised shopping area;

“It was noted how much crime had been reduced since the shelters had been built. It was agreed that youth nuisance had almost disappeared. Comments were made saying that where once it was intimidating to be in the Parade at night and no one would use the cash machine after dark, now this was not a problem.

“It was also noted that the once daily visits from the Fire Service to put

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out bin fires have been reduced to about twice in 18 months.

“The whole group thought the project had been totally successful and I was asked to forward the comments to other partners in this project”
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10) Play equipment provides a place for children to meet and socialize.

Playgrounds “provide a natural meeting place for older children and at the same time a space in which socialization skills can be developed naturally. A child can retreat to an item of play equipment and use it while he or she builds up confidence to rejoin a group” xxviii

“Another important factor for children was the desire to be part of the community, ‘being where it’s at’. Both the observations and the interviews revealed that children want to be where there is a very strong likelihood that they will meet up with other children or see what’s going on” xxix

“One reason why playgrounds are valued by young people is because they provide clearly identifiable pieces of local turf where they can hang out and meet each other” xxx

11) Play equipment safeguards an area for the future.

Play equipment “reserves” the land for play: the land is seen to have a clear purpose and benefit, so is less likely to be sold for development; whereas the value of natural play space is often not recognised, with the dangers that the land may be sold or fenced off to keep children out. (The latter was a problem that we regularly encountered in Thurrock, with residents keen to either “clear up” or fence off natural areas close to houses because they were used by children; trying to explain their play value was not easy, given the local fears and prejudices, and ward councillors would normally end up siding with adults in demanding “action”).

12) Play equipment enables parents to be involved with their children.

Play equipment gives “an opportunity for parents to be involved with their children” xxxi. The importance of this should not be overlooked: “If we are interested in children’s play, we must be interested in how parents relate to play and try to understand conditions needed to create or support parent involvement in play.” xxxii

We shouldn’t forget that play areas are also used and enjoyed by adults whenever they find a situation where it is socially acceptable for them to do so – a point that has been recognised in the design of play equipment since the 1920s! xxxiii

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13) Play equipment sends an important message to children (signs and symbols)

Good, well maintained play equipment sends an important message to children, as well of course to adults, that children do matter. However, in contrast:

“A boring or neglected play environment offers children few opportunities for satisfying play and gives children the message that adults don’t value them” ^{xxxiv}

Wendy Titman, in considering school grounds, argues that grounds give out “coded messages” to the children. Children read messages within a cultural context to decide whether a place was a “place for them” or “people like them” or not, and she went on to list positive and negative elements. ^{xxxv} “Fixed play equipment was symbolic for the children of a recognition by the school of some of their play needs...where children were involved and had witnessed the efforts of adults in improving their playgrounds, this conveyed messages about the extent to which they were valued which seems to have been more significant for them than the provision of the equipment per se.”^{xxxvi}

14) Play equipment can help to bring a community together.

“development of outside play and recreation spaces has been shown to have a measurable impact on local interaction, new friendships, community cohesion and community safety”, ^{xxxvii}

The process of discussing and consulting, fund raising, planning and building (where environmental features are integrated with equipment) can be “a community building activity which promotes self –reliance, group decision making, and personal empowerment among the parents” ^{xxxviii}

In addition, play areas and parks can be a good venue for children to spend time with a parent after a separation or divorce. ^{xxxix}

15) Play equipment can be a source of local community pride, and help in neighbourhood regeneration.

This is an obvious but sometimes overlooked aspect of equipment, which can frequently be used in a park improvement as an aspect of area regeneration. The major 1996 DoE report “People, Parks and Cities” gave the example of Stirling:

“developing the whole of the park as a child friendly environment (and not just one fenced off corner of it), and working with children and parents to design and even make new play structures can be the key to the successful renewal of a neighbourhood park” ^{xl}

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but it can apply to smaller sites as well, where new and well designed equipment can send a message of hope to a deprived community.

16) Play equipment is part of the local heritage and source of shared memories.

This point was made about the role of parks during the major re-appraisal of their role in the 1990s, but could equally apply to play areas.^{xii} The Comedia report, discussing parks, argued that people valued these aspects more than is realised, although “they may find it difficult to express precisely”^{xiii} We found, when consulting residents in Grays High Street, that many older people had fond memories of how Grays Beach had been in their youth, and were delighted when they found that some of their memories were incorporated into themes in the new site.

17) Play equipment can help to reduce serious accidents

A survey of 11-14 year olds in Gateshead found that about 40% of the young people visited “dangerous places”, and about half the young people said they took risks and dares when out with their friends. These included running across roads, sitting on railway tracks, lighting fires, and standing on bridge parapets.^{xiii}

While risky activity, and risk taking itself, is recognised as an essential part of growing up, clearly some forms of risk are less life threatening than others. Exciting forms of equipment and activities for this age group, particularly those aimed at boys, who are more likely to take risks than girls, could help to reduce the dangers from alternative and more dangerous diversions.

18) Play equipment is sustainable

Interestingly, at one time it was thought that adventure playgrounds would make the “old fashioned playgrounds of fixed equipment on a sea of asphalt.....relics of the past”.^{xiv} The reason that equipped areas have thrived, while adventure playgrounds have declined in number and struggle to survive, is simple: the equipped areas do not have to incur the costs of staffing. In most areas, the costs of maintaining play areas is low and can be contained in future budgets.

19) Play equipment can be sited close to home

Studies have repeatedly shown that children want to play close to home. It is possible to have equipped areas close to houses, particularly where they are clearly designed for young children (e.g. based on sand) and there are alternative facilities attractive for teenagers sited a little further away, where they will (hopefully!) not annoy residents.

20) Play equipment provides a lasting environment

Most play equipment has a life of at least ten years, in some cases over twenty years, so provides a continuing play experience for successive groups of children. It certainly meets the Big Lottery's aims: "We hope that this initiative will leave a lasting legacy for communities"^{xlv}

21) Most importantly of all, play equipment is valued by children.

"When asked for their regular and favourite play places children consistently referred to green open spaces (parks, fields) and, if there was one available locally, an equipped play area"^{xlvi} and "the most frequent activities referred to in the interviews were football and cycling, closely followed by use of playground equipment, playing in trees, and other active games."^{xlvii}

In terms of describing the ideal place to play, "equipment was of key importance. In decreasing order of popularity, swings, slides, climbing frames, roundabouts, see-saws and assault courses were most popular"^{xlviii}

Robin Moore had found a similar position ten years earlier: "Playgrounds and parks both appeared high on the list of elements indicated in children's drawings. [of their favourite play spaces].These findings indicate parks and playgrounds to be, or have the potential for becoming, two of the most strategic outdoor resources available to young people.regardless of levels of actual use, playgrounds can carry substantial social value to children"^{xlix}

The Challenges for play

I am not intending here to list all the issues that Play England will need to consider, but to highlight some of the most important ones for those people dealing with play on open spaces, whether major parks or small unstaffed green areas.

1) To integrate equipment with the natural environment.

This is possibly the most important, and at the same time one of the easiest of the challenges to meet – at least in part. The benefits of children's play in the natural environment are well known, and suggestions on how to encourage this are given in many publications¹. Perhaps one of the best descriptions of an integrated environment that works is Robin Moore's description of "the little park"^{li} which had a combination of a "centrally positioned play equipment, [which] signalled the entire space as a legitimate child territory" with a good location, varied topography and range of natural features.

One quick and easy way to add interest to play areas is to use sand. However:

“The British are remarkably bad at providing sand play areas, primarily because of the maintenance implications. It cannot be overstressed that large numbers of sand play areas are essential to meet the developmental requirements of small children”^{lii}

It took us several years in Thurrock before we had the courage to try sand; but once we realised that dogs do not mess in it, and that cats will not cross open grassland with no cover to get to it, we used it in more and more places. The result was fantastic; not just the young children happily digging away, but also the older children messing about and attempting to bury each other etc. We even found that it reduced night time vandalism: whether that was because the teenagers didn't want to get sand on their trainers, or whether they simply now saw the spaces as more for younger children, we were not sure, but were grateful for the outcome!

Many writers make the point that creative play comes through the provision of loose materials – sand, water, junk playgrounds, “and through the development of the environment into natural play space”^{liii}

They also point out that
“The wild or natural playspace has all but disappeared from our cities, towns and villages”^{liv}
making it more important that we try to compensate by providing “natural” enclaves within managed areas.

There is no question that natural play areas can provide different and complementary play experiences to those provided by equipment. However, as Heseltine and Holborn say,
“The combination of the natural environment with the fixed equipment playground offers a great deal towards high quality play”.^{lv}

While there are some very good examples around the country of integrating the two, there seems to be an unfortunate tendency by some local authorities to simply install “metal on rubber”, surrounded by a metal fence and a sea of short grass, in which the major costs have gone on the rubber and an external fence with no play value at all. In Thurrock, all the play areas renewed in 1990 had been provided with a wood or metal fence around the equipment; in most cases the local “vandals” very sensibly and very quickly demolished and removed the fences; where they did remain we found they made little difference to levels of dog fouling anyway. Rather than spend further money on fencing, we found that the lack of fences enabled us to more easily expand areas, and allow children to freely move between equipment and the surrounding environment; on several sites we installed some simple mounds and copses of young trees, and it was good to find that once these became tall enough for children to hide in they were clearly being used by children. Our best play areas did not have fences!^{lvi}

There are many examples from Scandinavia of excellent natural play spaces. While these may serve as an ideal to which we can aspire, the reality is that, with a different climate, topography, soil conditions and culture they can be difficult to create and sustain in many parts of Britain. Throughout many years of the 1990s rainfall in Thurrock was about 12 inches a year, technically making the area a desert; it was very difficult to establish trees in those conditions, and areas left “natural” to create wilder spaces would usually be burned by “vandals” during the summer, so that we eventually had to cut many areas at the start of the summer to prevent later destruction. Given the naturally flat landscape, the lack of established trees, and the tendency for the grass to stay brown throughout the summer holidays, our aspirations would take many years to bear fruit, and it was essential that the children had a varied experience from play equipment to compensate for the lack of other play opportunities.

2) To maintain a sense of the community’s and children’s ownership.

The recent Places for Play booklet makes the point: “With few exceptions, if a play space is to be sustainable and thrive, children, parents and the wider community need to be involved over the long term, taking pride and ownership in what has been created”^{lvii} This is not easy to achieve.

I remember our department working with residents on the most deprived estate in the most deprived ward in the whole of eastern England to find ways to improve their environment. We worked with them on a new design of the central open space, helped find money from various sources, involved all the local children in the ideas and design, then had the children help with the planting. The site with new equipment was opened at a special celebratory fete. We thought we had done everything right, and for a few months the site worked well. Unfortunately, we found a design fault on the swings we had used across the borough (they were showing cracks in the frame) and we had to put all the swings out of action. We did not bother to put notices on the sites as to the reasons, as signs would always disappear rapidly; however we did inform residents groups and councillors to keep them in the picture. Unfortunately not all the children in the area heard the message. One night a couple of boys took exception to the removal of “their “ swing, and decided that they would have a go at the equipment for the younger children: they piled furniture from a skip under the equipment, set light to it, and burned it to the ground – as it was aluminium equipment that we had tried for the first time, it actually melted to the ground.

From this you can probably tell that I am not sure how you maintain community and children’s ownership of unstaffed sites. I think for the average local authority maintaining many sites, with inadequate numbers of staff, and few if any park wardens, it can be incredibly difficult to maintain contact let alone ownership. Perhaps a combination

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of local trusts running sites (see 11 below), running some play schemes on the sites (see 8 below) and keeping change and interest on the site (see 10 below) may achieve this; perhaps a nearby school could adopt the site and be involved in reviewing the site and considering changes needed as part of an annual project. Realistically, however, most local authorities would not have the staff or resources to maintain this level of involvement on every site, and I think Play England will need to consider what is practical, not simply what is ideal.

3) To make sites more interesting and exciting.

In most cases, we have come a long way from the concrete and metal relics of the past, which led the Caplans to say:

“Most public playgrounds are a disaster area for young children. It would appear they are designed by adults who do not know the needs of the children”^{lviii} However, there is a strong case for making play areas more exciting:

“parents often complain that play equipment is not exciting enough and that children have grown out of it by the time they are seven or eight”^{lix}

It is of course not just a question of what is provided, but also how: “it is best to create mixes of activities so that play opportunities flow from one area to another”^{lx}

Norway has led the way in reacting to what they call “the dangerous safety” of playgrounds and the need to make play areas more exciting, and to have confidence in children’s skills and vitality.^{lxi}

We found, back in the mid 1990s that the simple introduction of cable rides on several sites created huge excitement among local children, and it was great to see, even in the most deprived and “toughest” communities, children would patiently queue and wait their turn to go down the wire. There is now an increasing range of equipment that has been designed to provide more excitement for older children, and it would be good to see the manufacturers trying to push the boundaries even further, so that local authorities can choose to provide greater excitement where they have risk assessed that the greater play and social benefits, and possible reduction in alternative risky behaviour, outweigh the increased risks on that site. Peter Heseltine with the late Bob Cook started an approach to comparing risk and play value; if the social context was also put into the analysis (i.e. looking also at the risk of alternative unsafe or anti-social behaviour taking place if exciting play opportunities are not provided) then local authorities could have a robust strategy to defend their decisions.^{lxii} Play England could take this work further, and work with RoSPA and other agencies to publicise the outcomes and lessons of sites that take a more adventurous approach.

4) To provide a longer play experience

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Research has shown that children, on average, play on an item of equipment for less than four minutes. Given that a typical local play area has five or six items, this ties in with the research that children only stay on a playground for about twenty-one minutes on average.^{lxiii} It doesn't take a genius to work out that if more items of equipment are provided, then, on average, children will stay longer – this was certainly our experience.

“Destination” parks such as Victoria Park in Bath, King Georges Fields in Brentwood, and Grays Beach in Grays, have all shown that children (and families) will happily stay all day at a well-equipped play area. We found that children would even stay a long time at well equipped unstaffed parks that had neither toilets or café, such as Corringham Town Park; and there was a simple relationship that the more variety and interest on a site, the longer children would stay.

Of course it is not just the range of equipment itself that can contribute to the length of play enjoyed:

“The greater and more various the range of surfaces, the higher the play value of the playground”^{lxiv}

5) To ensure sites are sustainable

The Big Lottery funding will only last three years. While the additional revenue costs of new equipment on an existing site are small and will hopefully be able to be absorbed by local authorities in existing budgets, almost any other form of new play provision is going to have a significant future revenue cost that many local authorities are not able to cope with. Although Play England have been charged with trying to find ways to make play sustainable in the long term, it is difficult to see how some local authorities will be able to commit to those types of play schemes that have significant future revenue costs unless long term solutions are identified beforehand.

6) To provide for older children/teenagers.

Many play sites still lack any provision for older children, yet experience has shown that teenagers will use equipment that is aimed at them. Apart from the play and recreational value to the young people, there is a strong likelihood that this will reduce conflicts on play areas. If play equipment is more dispersed (but still close enough for children to move between) then there is less chance of conflict between rival groups of children infringing each other's territory.

7) To make sites more inclusive.

For a while there was a common misunderstanding that this would involve making all items of play equipment wheelchair accessible. However, only around four to five per cent of disabled children use wheelchairs, and of those, over half leave their chair while playing.^{lxv}

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The NPFA document “Can Play Will Play” gives a much better understanding of the needs of children with disabilities. This found that social barriers were more significant than the limitations of items of equipment, and argued:

“ Having a one hundred per cent accessible playground is not possible. Disabled children have a wide variety of needs and simply satisfying the needs of one group of children may make a playground inaccessible to others”^{lxvi} The document gives a range of suggestions on measure that should be taken on play areas to make them more accessible to disabled children and carers.

This is an area that will be covered in the Play England workshops, so authorities should also receive practical guidance through those.

8) To integrate with play schemes.

Many play experts value staffed play schemes, and staffed adventure play areas, more highly than unstaffed play areas. The reality however is that such provision is very expensive, and unless there is a massive increase in revenue budgets, will only ever provide for a small proportion of children in a local authority area. It is also unrealistic to expect to be able to provide the same opportunities in an unstaffed situation:

“There have been no successful solutions to providing unleadered play areas which contain equipment children can move about and build themselves”^{lxvii}.

Nevertheless, holiday and after school play schemes that are provided near equipped areas can provide a good alternative at a much lower cost. The Thurrock Play Network have experimented by providing play schemes from metal play containers; the containers are fitted with a toilet for the staff, can have shading attached, and provide a store for toys, paints and other activities. The containers are fairly cheap and (almost!) vandal proof. The Play Network have found that, by placing the play schemes near equipped play areas, many children will gather on the equipment waiting for the play scheme to start, and return to the equipment at the end of the scheme to lengthen their play time.

It would be interesting too to see these kinds of projects also experimenting with temporary water play installations, where vandalism or lack of staffing prevented the permanent use of water.^{lxviii}

9) To reconcile how children can be seen and be secret.

A great deal of research has demonstrated how children both want to be seen (for their own security and safety) and yet have spaces which are secret and hidden from adults. (Even older children do not want to be in places that are too hidden and where bullying could be a problem). Planning for Play advises:

“Research has shown that children prefer play space to be visible and readily accessible, to be at the heart of the communities and the environments with which they are familiar”^{lxi}

While this sounds simple in theory, my own experience was that it was one of the most difficult issues to resolve in practice. Play areas intended for younger children that were sited close to houses became magnets for teenagers in the evening, causing significant problems for, and conflict with, local residents. We found that providing shelters and activities (e.g. ball courts and skate parks) for teenagers further away could sometimes resolve the problem, particularly if the changes involved the teenagers in the decision making (detached youth workers and police community officers were both effective at making the contacts in the evening); however on occasions the play equipment simply had to be moved. It is also possible on housing estates to have areas that are clearly intended for younger children only, and are locked in the evening by local residents – but good intentions are difficult to maintain when key adults move on or their children grow up.

While each location has to be considered uniquely, it may be possible for Play England to showcase some good examples, particularly in difficult areas.

10) To demonstrate change and continuing interest in the site.

There is no question that if we want children to continue to retain ownership and interest in sites, then their involvement has to be backed up by physical change –perhaps an environmental change or additional equipment:

“change is one of the major prerequisites of successful playgrounds” ; although

“the provision of one new item annually is of minor value as children will rapidly explore and exhaust its potential”^{lxx}

it incrementally adds to the interest and play value on the site, as well as demonstrating to children a continuing interest in their affairs.

11) To find the right organisation for play at a local level

I think this is a major issue where Play England will hopefully develop some useful advice on alternative models. There are of course some local authorities that manage to continue to give priority to children’s play and provide excellent services, but too often it has remained a Cinderella service, vulnerable to constant re-organisations and savings. In those cases, play will only flourish where the councils devolve responsibilities and budgets to some kind of dedicated play or parks organisation. This issue was identified in the 1996 DoE report *People Parks and Cities*, where a range of options are outlined.^{lxxi} The idea of dedicated Trusts managing parks is beginning to gather some momentum^{lxxii} but it will be essential if that happens that the needs of children take centre stage:

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“Unless play and parks go together, an holistic approach to children’s play and the overall quality of outdoor provision for all is unable to be achieved”^{lxxiii}.

If dedicated trusts are set up to manage local parks, then consideration will still need to be given to all the local and smaller play areas. In theory it would be possible for a district wide play organisation to work alongside and provide expertise to local parks and open spaces trusts, but there are probably many models that could prove more effective than the current position.

12)To improve opportunities for cycling and wheeled games

Despite it being a major leisure activity for many children^{lxxiv} cycling has the potential for significant expansion^{lxxv}. Dartford experimented with a cycle training track for young children at their central park, and we bussed children from Thurrock, with their bikes, to establish what they liked and disliked about that track, and their ideas for their ideal track, before building tracks at Corringham and Stanford. Both were reasonably successful, although the willow tunnels on one of the tracks that children had suggested didn’t even last long enough to be photographed!

13)To improve maintenance of play sites.

The importance of good maintenance is obvious, but unfortunately we are still in a position where many councils view their role as being merely to keep play equipment safe, rather than keeping sites attractive. The message this sends to children is one of a lack of concern, and in turn is likely to lead to anti-social behaviour; but it also sends a message to other users of the site that the site is uncared for.^{lxxvi}

Conclusion

The Big Lottery Fund’s Children’s Play Programme provides a major challenge and opportunity for the way that children’s play is facilitated. There are many innovative issues that can be addressed, but it would be a shame if we spent so much time on those that we missed the opportunities to make easy and obvious improvements to children’s lives now. There is a danger that we fall into the trap of “the best is the enemy of the good”. As Bob Hughes said in his editorial to the final issue of the International Play Journal:

“I believe that it is pointless to say important things about play and about children if they are not followed through by acts which reflect that importance”^{lxxvii}

Andy Furze, May 2006

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- ⁱ Planning for Play, 2006, 2.3 page 10
- ⁱⁱ Planning for Play, 9.1, page 16
- ⁱⁱⁱ All these quotes are from a paper by Rob Wheway; see www.capt.org.uk
- ^{iv} M Hillman, J Adams, J Whitelegg: One False Move, a study of children's independent mobility, Policy Studies Institute, 1990
- ^v R Wheway, A Millward: Child's Play: Facilitating play in housing estates, Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997
- ^{vi} See for example the Audit Commission Best Value performance Indicator 115, "children need to encounter and learn to manage an acceptable level of risk in their play". Local Authorities can also now utilise the position statement of the Play Safety Forum, 2002. The Mayor of London report, "Guide to preparing play strategies", April 2005, has a good short section on risk and safety (pages 40-43)
- ^{vii} Tim Gill, Risky Business, in Green Places May 2006, pages 24-27
- ^{viii} Planning for Play, 8.6, page 16
- ^{ix} There are discussions on this in Planning for Play, as well as many other publications, e.g. Gill Coffin and Morris Williams "Children's outdoor play in the Built Environment", National Children's Play and Recreation Unit, 1989, pages 44-5
- ^x Peter Heseltine and John Holborn, "Playgrounds: the planning, design, and construction of play environments" Mitchell, 1987, p115
- ^{xi} Heseltine and Holborn, p115
- ^{xii} Rob Wheway and Alison Millward: "Child's Play: Facilitating play on housing estates", Chartered Institute of Housing, 1997
- ^{xiii} Liz Greenhalgh and Ken Worpole "Park Life; Urban Parks and Social Renewal" A report by Comedia in association with Demos, Comedia, 1995, p41
- ^{xiv} Wheway and Millward, p37
- ^{xv} Wheway and Millward, p36
- ^{xvi} Robin C Moore "Childhood's Domain; play and place in child development" MIG communications, 1986 p113
- ^{xvii} see e.g. Kim Susan Blakely, "Parent's Conceptions of Social Dangers to Children in the Urban Environment", pp 16-25 in "Children's Environments", Volume 11 no 1, March 1994
- ^{xviii} see e.g. Heseltine and Holborn p72
- ^{xix} Greenhalgh and Worpole, p42
- ^{xx} Greenhalgh and Worpole, p45
- ^{xxi} Heseltine and Holborn, p86
- ^{xxii} C L E Rohde and A D Kandle, "Human well being, natural landscapes and wildlife in urban areas. A review" English Nature Science no.22, English Nature 1994, p156
- ^{xxiii} Jimmy Jolley: "Outdoor environments – a planning guide", in International Play Journal, Vol 3 no 3 Sept 1995, p181
- ^{xxiv} Arvid Bengtsson; "The Child's Right to Play", International Playground Association, 1974, p77
- ^{xxv} both from Heseltine and Holborn, p17
- ^{xxvi} Heseltine and Holborn, p115
- ^{xxvii} reported by Ray Munro-Crump, South Ockendon Community Forum, November 2003
- ^{xxviii} Heseltine and Holborn, p18
- ^{xxix} Wheway and Millward, p33
- ^{xxx} Moore, p110
- ^{xxxi} Heseltine and Holborn, p99 See also Coffin and Morris, p30.
- ^{xxxii} Ingerid Bo: "Parent involvement in play", in International Play Journal Vol 2 No 1 January 1994, p32.
- ^{xxxiii} Brent Elliott and Ken Fieldhouse "Play and Sport" in "the Regeneration of Public Parks", ed by Jan Woudstra and Ken Fieldhouse, Garden History Society and landscape Design Trust, 2000, p155
- ^{xxxiv} T. Casey Environments for Play, September 2003
- ^{xxxv} Wendy Titman "Special Places, Special People; the hidden curriculum of school grounds", Learning through Landscapes, 1994, p25
- ^{xxxvi} Titman p53
- ^{xxxvii} Planning for Play, 15.1 p21

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- xxxviii Janis Birkeland "Ecofeminist playgardens. A guide to growing greenies organically" in International play Journal Vol 2 no 1 January 1994, p51, talking of "playgardens".
- xxxix Greenhalgh and Worpole, p45
- xl Liz Greenhalgh and Ken Worpole with Robin Grove White and Tom Lonsdale "People, Parks and Cities a guide to current good practice in urban parks", a report for the Department of the Environment, HMSO, 1996.p30
- xli see David Crouch "The popular culture of city parks", Comedia, 1994
- xlii Greenhalgh and Worpole p4
- xliii Child Accident Prevention Trust: "Taking chances; the lifestyles and leisure risk of young people", 2002
- xliv M Allen, "Planning for Play" 1975, quoted in Keith Cranwell "towards a history of adventure playgrounds 1931-2000, in "An architecture of play: a survey of London's adventure playgrounds" ed Nils Norman, 2003, p19
- xlv Planning for Play, Foreword, p4
- xlvi Wheway and Millward, p40
- xlvii Wheway and Millward, p42
- xlviii Wheway and Millward, p11-12
- lix Moore p108
- l see e.g. Coffin and Williams, pp35-36, and Heseltine and Holborn
- li Moore p158
- lii Heseltine and Holborn p135
- liii Heseltine and Holborn p18
- liv Heseltine and Holborn p21
- lv Heseltine and Holborn p26
- lvi Others may differ on this – eg. ILAM's Outdoor Play areas for Children 1992 stated, "Fencing is essential around all children's play areas." However my own view is that each site has to be treated uniquely, and that in some case, fences not only serve no purpose, but also actually interfere with the free flow of play.
- lvii Places for Play, Playlink, 2004
- lviii F and T Caplan "The Power of Play" 1979, quoted in Heseltine and Holborn, p11
- lix Planning for Play, 12.1 p18
- lx Heseltine and Holborn p 173
- lxi A Flemmen, "Real Play", in Playrights Vol XXII p5-9
- lxii Bob Cook and Peter Heseltine: "Assessing Risk on Children's Playgrounds" RoSPA 1998
- lxiii Peter Heseltine; "A Review of Playground and Related Surveys and Studies" Sports Council 1994 p iv
- lxiv Karen King, David Ball and Hilary Koe: "Playground safety – the way forward" University of East Anglia 1991
- lxv Mogens Tom Jensen "Creating playground equipment for all children" in Let's Play April 1999, p14-15
- lxvi Alison John and Rob Wheway: "Can Play Will Play; disabled children and access to outdoor playgrounds" NPFA 2004 p14
- lxvii Heseltine and Holborn p101
- lxviii There is an interesting example in Play rights March 1995
- lxix Planning for Play, 8.4, p15
- lxx Heseltine and Holborn, p 12 and 112
- lxxi People Parks and Cities p20-24
- lxxii e.g. see Green Places February 2006 pp14-15 and 34-37
- lxxiii People Parks and Cities p88
- lxxiv see Wheway and Millward
- lxxv Martin Rosenbaum, Children and the Environment, National Children's Bureau, 1993
- lxxvi People Parks and Cities p25 "Good park maintenance is actually a pre-condition of the public's sense of security and trust"
- lxxvii Bob Hughes, editorial, in International Play Journal Vol 4 No 3 September 1996, p146