

Developing Models for Sustainable Play Provision

Report to Department for Culture, Media and Sport



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NCB promotes the voices, interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives.

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1 Summary

Introduction

In 2005, the BIG Lottery Fund announced that £155 million was to be made available in the Children's Play Initiative for England. Of this funding, £124 million will go to local authorities, £16 million will create an Innovation Fund, and £15 million has been allocated to the Children's Play Council (CPC) to establish a national and regional infrastructure for supporting children's play. When this funding was first announced, the minister at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) with responsibility for children's play, Rt Hon Estelle Morris, said:

Lottery money runs out, by definition. It was never meant to be long-term funding. Lottery money should serve to yank more money into play. It should lever more money from local authorities and the community, private and voluntary sector ... By 2012, however, the rest of society must have been sufficiently persuaded that the question 'Shall we now stop funding play?' would be a very silly one to ask, because communities could not imagine a time without it.

As part of its research and policy development programme to support children's play, DCMS asked CPC to investigate the factors that promote the sustainability of local provision. This report and the accompanying guide for practitioners, *Playing on*, are the result of that work.

The research

Between April 2004 and April 2005, CPC undertook research for DCMS to identify ways in which the play sector could become more financially sustainable. The research included: a seminar run with EQUIPE (Equal in Play and Enterprise) to discuss the potential role of social enterprise in sustainable play provision; a literature survey; a questionnaire survey to readers of *PlayToday*; and in-depth interviews with the managers of ten play and childcare services and projects of different types and sizes. In addition to this report to DCMS, CPC has produced a guide for play providers based on the findings of the project (Cole-Hamilton 2006).

Factors in sustaining play provision

There is widespread agreement in the play sector that if, in the long term, children are to have access to play provision in their own neighbourhoods and free of charge, the vast majority of the funding for this must come from the public purse – both from central and local government funds. Whilst there is some potential for raising income from voluntary and charitable sources,

through local fundraising and from generating income through business practices, this is limited; and its short-term nature leads to insecurity and a danger that the core service – providing good free play opportunities for local children and young people – will be neglected.

Since this research was undertaken, a number of initiatives have increased the potential for improving the sustainability of funding for play providers. These initiatives comprise the launch of the Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play Initiative; the recognition of the role of the Every Child Matters – Change for Children programme; and the possibility of having performance indicators for play provision in future Audit Commission and Ofsted local authority inspection regimes.

There are, nevertheless, a number of factors that the play sector can address to ensure that it is as attractive as possible to potential funders from the public, private and voluntary sectors. In addressing these factors they will be:

- meeting the needs of local children, families and communities
- employing strong management, including good financial management
- understanding the complexities of funding and income generation
- having a skilled, well-trained, motivated workforce
- involving children and young people, their families and other local community members
- working in partnership with local organisations
- networking widely with other local groups and potential stakeholders
- linking up with local plans and strategies, including the local Play Strategy, open space strategies, Children and Young People's Plans and the local Community Plan
- making use of local infrastructure support
- securing commitment from the local authority, including officers and councillors
- evaluating and monitoring their work.

Those involved in the projects and services participating in this research generally felt that these conditions, whilst not guaranteeing secure, long-term funding, will help make their future more secure.

The future

In general the play sector seems optimistic about the future, with the majority of respondents to the questionnaire and interviewees in the case studies thinking that their service will grow in the next five years. Perhaps it is important to note here that the research was undertaken at the time when the sector was expecting to receive funding through the lottery play fund, which has now been confirmed and allocated.

2 Background to the project

Funding for play provision has always been precarious. Play is a non-statutory service and has a relatively low status in local authority and other budget allocations. In recent years much funding for play has come from short-term project funds or has been earmarked for capital expenditure. As a result, many new play projects have been started; but anecdotal evidence suggests that some of these have quickly fallen into disrepair and been abandoned, and many more are in danger of doing so, because the revenue budgets are not sufficient to run and maintain them.

This DCMS-funded CPC project aimed to work with the play sector and other similar, community-based sectors, to identify ways in which play provision can become more financially sustainable. It took as a basic premise the notion that all children need a range of indoor and outdoor play opportunities, in their own neighbourhoods and free of charge.

The project included a literature review, aimed at identifying different ways in which play and other similar types of provision can become more financially sustainable; a seminar held jointly with EQUIPE to discuss the potential role of social enterprise in supporting play provision; a questionnaire survey to establish the relative importance of different factors in long-term sustainability; and case study research, looking at successful or potential models for sustainability.

Since this research was undertaken, there have been significant changes in government policy and funding directly affecting play provision. The Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme places a duty on local authorities to cooperate with other agencies to ensure there are opportunities for children's recreation, including play, and Children and Young People's Plans should show how this will be achieved. As part of their Joint Area Review inspections of children's services, Ofsted is expected to assess how children's services authorities are ensuring there are 'safe places for children to play and socialise'. In addition, DCMS has been funding CPC to develop and pilot performance indicators for local authority provision for children's play.

Even though none of these initiatives offer direct funding for play provision, they have the potential to have a positive impact on its long-term sustainability by encouraging local authorities and their partners to consider children's play needs in their planning and service development.

3 The research

Getting serious about play

The major national consultation process undertaken by DCMS to inform the development of the report *Getting Serious About Play* (DCMS 2004) involved considerable discussion about the long-term sustainability of play provision. Further analysis of the consultation reports, written by CPC for DCMS, identified factors that might improve the sustainability of play provision. These factors comprise:

- a commitment to long-term public funding for play provision from central government, with recognition that relying on individual local authorities to support children's play leaves play provision vulnerable to local authority cuts and an uncertain future
- government funding for play provision in England, which should be underpinned by a coordinated, cross-governmental national play policy and strategy underpinned by a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure adequate play opportunities for children and young people
- improved fundraising and income-generating skills and opportunities – including widening the range and scope of funding bodies approached; involving local business and other organisations; selling services; asking for resources in kind; and developing the role of social enterprise
- increased community involvement through consultation, management groups, fundraising and other methods
- greater partnership working that links up with local people and other relevant organisations
- better infrastructure support, including support for play associations, developing a trained, valued workforce and working within a local play policy and strategy
- a more strategic approach to the development of provision involving systematic business planning and development plans for the future of projects, linking in with other local plans and strategies
- greater commitment from local authorities, including core funding, representation on management groups, involvement of local politicians and promoting a long-term commitment
- raising awareness of the importance of play and valuing children
- improving evaluation and monitoring, and the sharing and building of good practice.

Enterprising play and evaluation of Quality in Play

In March 2004, CPC and EQUIPE held a seminar to discuss the possible role of social enterprise in providing quality play opportunities for children and young

people. The seminar brought together people already involved in social enterprise, in particular in provision for children, and people from different types of play provision. Participants discussed the differing requirements that might arise from different situations, including:

- unstaffed play provision offering open-access play in open spaces around housing, streets and public areas
- supervised play provision
- formal childcare
- school-linked provision
- support organisations.

In addition, the participants discussed the value and importance of stakeholders and partners; what could be learnt from business models and community development models; and how existing legislation and planning guidance could be used to the advantage of play provision.

The report of the seminar (EQUIPE 2004) identifies some potential for social enterprise to support play provision but acknowledges that, if play provision is to be free for children and young people to use, income must be generated by means other than that of directly charging users.

The external evaluation of the quality assurance tool, Quality in Play (QiP), involved interviews with play providers, mentors and assessors. One of the aims of the evaluation was 'to evaluate the benefits or otherwise of QiP for play projects including exploring the potential for the social enterprise model to aid sustainability (Russell 2005).

Both the evaluation of Quality in Play and the seminar on enterprising play identified a number of major issues in the sustainability of children's play provision. These issues were similar to those identified in the consultation events for *Getting Serious About Play* and included: meeting the needs of children and families; good management, especially financial management; using a variety of appropriate funding sources and methods; involving children, parents and communities; having good networks and working in partnership with other organisations; gaining local support; evaluating the value of the provision both to children and to local communities; linking with local and national government agendas; having a strategic approach; developing and training the workforce and marketing.

CPC research

A questionnaire based on the findings of the EQUIPE seminar and the *Getting Serious About Play* consultation findings was circulated to readers of *PlayToday* in the autumn of 2004. Details of the 150 providers who responded are given in Appendix 1.

To gain more insight into the key elements of sustainability, CPC contacted ten projects and services of differing size and nature. This included a national voluntary organisation running a number of playgrounds primarily for disabled children, their friends and relatives; different types of childcare organisation; local authority play services; independently run local playgrounds and support organisations. For details of the ten projects and services interviewed for the case studies, see Appendix 2.

4 Research findings

Optimism in the play sector

In general, optimism was high amongst respondents and they felt that play provision would grow over the next five years.

The questionnaire asked respondents to imagine five years ahead and describe how they thought their service or provision would have changed. Over half of the respondents (54 per cent) indicated that they thought their service or provision would have grown and be similar in nature. Another 18 per cent thought the service would have grown but changed in nature; 12 per cent thought it would be about the same; and 6 per cent thought it would have shrunk or disappeared. The potential changes included:

- the impact of new types of organisation for children's services
- different types of funding arrangements based on changes in the way local authority and government funds are distributed
- the possibility of the extended school programme affecting children's play provision
- problems specific to some provision, including premises and space.

Respondents who imagined a decline in their service were concerned about short-term funding and the fact that their existing funding streams were coming to an end and may not be renewed.

Amongst the case studies there was also optimism. Most of the projects and services thought they would either have grown and expanded their remit or be roughly the same in five years time. The optimism was tempered, however, by concern that changes in government policy and an increase in childcare provision might divert public funding from free, open-access play provision. There was also concern that play services might have a very low profile in the implementation of the Every Child Matters agenda but, amongst the case study projects and services, there was a determination to use that agenda to benefit play provision as far as was possible. Other potential changes included alterations in the layout of, and equipment in, playgrounds as a result of the changing needs and interests of children and young people.

General concerns raised by case studies

The lack of a long-term, central government vision for children's play provision was seen – by many of the managers involved in the case study research – as a major problem in their long-term sustainability. Under-investment in the whole play sector over a number of years, combined with a poor understanding of how important provision for good play opportunities is to children and young people, their families and their communities, was seen as a key factor. There

was also concern that current government focus on young children and teenagers was sidelining the needs of school-aged children and diverting attention and resources away from them and their play needs.

Playwork was also seen as under-valued in central policy compared with early childhood provision, childcare and youth provision. Training was not sufficiently widely available and information was not always given to small local play organisations.

There was also concern that, in some areas, parents and families did not really understand the value and importance of play to their children – partly because parents themselves, who had often grown up in crowded housing estates, may not have had good play opportunities themselves and may not understand the possibilities offered by well-resourced play provision.

Factors in sustainability

Meeting the needs of local children families and communities

The primary aim of play provision should be that it is able to provide good play opportunities to local children and young people free of charge. Supervised play provision must be child-centred, fun, enjoyable, exciting and empowering. For children there should be new experiences, a variety of experiences and opportunities for free expression. There should also be a balance between the opportunity for children to challenge themselves and take risks and the need for safety.

New play provision usually emerges in response to local demand and is set up specifically to fulfil unmet need. Established provision, however, may have been set up in response to old demands and to remain viable may need to adapt and change to meet current need and demand. Provision which cannot show it is responding to the needs of local children and families is less likely to be sustainable.

Childcare provision has to find a balance between meeting the play needs of children and ensuring parents are confident their children are safe and in the care of competent people. Good provision will also ensure that it is accessible to all local children who want to use it including those who are disabled or have other specific needs.

The most important factor in sustainability of provision identified through the CPC questionnaire survey and case study research was that the provision was meeting the needs of local children and young people. There was a unanimous feeling that this was crucial to future funding.

This also meant addressing the needs of parents and the community. In addition, providing a service which is inclusive and serves all local children, including those who are disabled or have specific needs, was seen to be essential or quite important by 96 per cent of the survey respondents.

Amongst the case study projects, the after-school clubs only thrived if they were sufficiently flexible to meet the changing needs and demands of parents' working patterns and if the children attending were happy and enjoying themselves. For the specialist playgrounds, 'word-of-mouth' recommendations by parents and children ensured they could maintain viable numbers of children attending. The open-access play provision, staffed and unstaffed, was only sustainable if it was well used by children and young people and this depended on its ability to attract and meet the needs of the diverse groups in the local community. The two support organisations had to show they were meeting need through offering the type of support, information and infrastructure useful to local projects in providing for users and their families.

Offering inclusive play services that attracted and supported the play of all local children was important to the after-school clubs, the resource centre and the mainstream play services.

The value of their projects and services to local community members played an important role in the sustainability of all the case studies. The resource centre was also a focal point for many community activities and saw its welcoming and inclusive nature as one of its main strengths. The playbus and after-school clubs were meeting needs identified by local communities and the bus, in particular, offered a focal point for adults and children in isolated rural communities to meet and socialise.

Good management

Key to the promotion and sustainability of good play provision is good day-to-day and financial management. Projects represented at the EQUIPE seminar agreed that much could be learnt from business management. This referred, in particular, to financial management and good management practices in relation to staff and training.

Good financial management and planning involved having development plans, evaluating the implementation of the plan, allowing for flexibility, and ensuring there is full understanding of all the running costs and potential expenditure of the project. Having a full understanding of costs in relation to expenditure, and the cost of providing for each child can be important in the effectiveness of future funding.

Almost all survey respondents saw strong management and efficient running of the provision as crucial to the survival of their projects or services. They thought that good day-to-day management (100 per cent), the enthusiasm of one or more individuals (98 per cent), preparation of development plans for the future (97 per cent), and having a systematic business approach to management (95 per cent) were either essential or quite important in the sustainability of their project or service.

All the case study projects and services agreed that good day-to-day and financial management is not only good practice but is now crucial to

sustainability. For those offering direct services this involves knowing what children and young people want and need and making sure you are consistent in providing this; having a defined management structure with clear lines of accountability and responsibility; ensuring that all staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities; having agreed policies and procedures for key functions including child protection, maintenance and standards; and ensuring that all problems and issues are followed up quickly and effectively.

Understanding both day-to-day financial management and long-term financial planning was seen as important by the managers of the services and projects interviewed for the case studies. The projects with the larger budgets were developing their long-term planning. For example, Coram's Fields has a ten year strategy with accompanying financial and fundraising targets. The local authority managers running services were clear that they needed to have an understanding of the financial circumstances of their services, even if they did not manage the day-to-day financial issues. The smaller organisations also had support with financial control, either from small businesses or voluntary management committee members with financial expertise.

All the projects and services acknowledged the value of strong, enthusiastic management both of individual managers and of voluntary management committees or local authority officers. Strong, enthusiastic managers were required to 'keep fighting for' resources to secure the future of the provision or service. Even when project managers had delegated powers, they valued support from their management structures. Confident committees and managers were also more likely to recognise the value of risk-taking and potential failure as a learning tool, and to experiment with new ideas even if they were not guaranteed to work. One project manager said, in the interview:

The best entrepreneurs in the world fail miserably loads of times and just keep getting back up and doing something else. And we seem to be unable to accept failure. And maybe that's what's important, to accept there might be several failures. Lots of things have not worked here too. But that's all right, don't do them then, do something else.

In one project, restrictive management was curtailing the expansion of the service to meet new needs and demands because the proposed changes did not match the agenda of the managing organisation.

Identifying appropriate funding sources

Most of the projects at the EQUIPE seminar required a variety of funding sources to ensure their sustainability. Most also felt that the key to sustainability was long-term mainstream funding, especially if they were to be able to offer a service free of charge to children. In addition to national and local government funding, different sources of funding included the NHS, housing associations, private funding, selling goods and services, resources in kind including premises and support with maintenance, and local fundraising events.

If children are to use play provision free of charge someone has to pay for it. Identifying those people who will benefit from the provision and ensuring that they understand themselves to be stakeholders is key to identifying potential sources of funding. For example, if play provision is seen to be promoting children's health then funding can be found through health services. Local businesses may also be benefiting from play provision as it is offering a service to the children of parents who work for them and may be helping children develop skills they will need in the future in order to be part of the local workforce.

However, there is concern amongst play providers that the more they are seen to have to meet strict government agendas in order to get funding, the greater the danger that the nature of play provision will change and move away from the needs of children for free play, choice and control to more organised activity.

The evaluation of *Quality in Play* also found that, frequently, local authority funding for voluntary and community sector play provision no longer covers basic core costs and that it is becoming increasingly project or outcome-based. This creates a major problem for play provision. Providers are having to identify alternative sources of funding and are moving away from local authority grant funding which is becoming harder to access.

Of the questionnaire respondents, 90 per cent said that access to central government funding schemes was either essential (75 per cent) or quite important (15 per cent) to their future development. Other important funding issues included being able to access local grant schemes, applying to a diverse range of funders, receiving core funding from the local authority, being able to access free or cheap resources, and getting guaranteed funding from sources other than a local authority.

The case study projects and services received funding from diverse sources. The after-schools clubs were funded through charging parents – although 'hidden' costs were subsidised by schools – for example by giving premises free and local authorities giving officer time to support contracted out services. Amongst those services charging users there was a general feeling that if the full-costs were passed on to parents many would not be able to afford the fees. One service, which had been free, was considering charging users but the manager felt this would definitely restrict access to the provision for children from low-income families.

The larger services, both public and voluntary sector, all received funding from a variety of sources including public funds from local authorities and central government; lottery and other charitable trusts and funds; selling some services, for example renting out buildings or open space; and local fundraising. Government funds tended to be linked to specific funding programmes and spanned a number of different government departments. Children's Fund money was supporting play services in some areas, Home

Office and ODPM grants in others. In Walsall, for example, money for play areas was provided through a number of sources including SureStart, Neighbourhood Renewal and Landfill Tax Credits. For services receiving local authority funding this was increasingly being given on the basis of service level agreements or grants with 'outcomes' attached.

Public money was increasingly becoming 'restricted funds' supporting specific projects. In addition, time limits were being put on funding, making it impossible to plan for the future. One year funding was common but universally seen as damaging to the long-term progress of the services. Three-year funding, whilst more useful, was also considered to be too short-term for good development planning.

Charitable Trusts were not always seen to have criteria that best supported the needs of children and services. For example, one playground primarily for disabled children was trying to extend its reach to non-disabled children to become a more inclusive provision. One of its major charitable funders, however, was refusing an extension of funding on the grounds that the playground would no longer be specialist and would not meet its criteria, namely that a high proportion of children using the service were disabled.

One important effect of the need to apply to diverse funders in order for projects and services to survive was the need to develop fundraising expertise in the organisation and spend resources on this. Considerable amounts of staff time were spent in finding potential funders, drafting applications and in meeting potential funders. As funding bids were not always successful, some project managers felt that resources were wasted because of the lack of committed government funds for play provision.

Involving children, parents and communities

The sustainability of local play provision is partly dependent on the attitude of local children and community members towards it. Consulting and involving the community in developing facilities helps ensure they feel a sense of ownership and are more prepared to support attempts to sustain the provision. Good play provision promotes the feeling that something good is going on in the local community. Promoting the benefits of local provision to the community helps develop community approaches. For example in one South London school, represented at the EQUIPE seminar, on-site provision for play has increased the popularity of the school, helping secure additional resources and space for children to play in the local community.

Almost all survey respondents thought that involving local children and families in the provision was essential (84 per cent) or quite important (15 per cent) to sustainability and future funding. Of the respondents, 93 per cent thought that involving other community groups and members was important; with 89 per cent saying support from other local people was essential (63 per cent) or quite important (26 per cent).

All the case study projects and services involved children and young people, their families and local communities to some extent but the degree of this differed. One of the most active services in promoting community involvement was the Walsall Play Service who worked closely with 'friends' groups in some of the parks and play areas they managed. These friends groups played a very active part in fundraising and in maintaining interest and a sense of ownership amongst local people.

In another area, the play service manager was concerned that tokenistic involvement of children and young people by their local authorities might be leading to disillusionment, which was reflecting on play services' desire for greater participation by children and young people.

Working in partnership

For most of the projects represented at the EQUIPE seminar, working in partnership with local organisations was key to their continued development and sustainability. Working in partnership allows projects to access funding streams that might not otherwise be available to them, such as some national and local government funds. Partnership working also helps ensure the needs of children are being met holistically rather than in a piecemeal fashion. The research found a general feeling that play provision often benefited from the support of other services and found it difficult to survive in isolation. When play projects worked in partnership with other local organisations, it was seen to be of mutual benefit.

Discussions at the EQUIPE seminar and in the *Getting Serious about Play* consultation had indicated that partnership working was crucial to development and sustainability. The questionnaire survey verified this and 92 per cent of respondents thought that working with statutory agencies was either essential (66 per cent) or quite important (26 per cent). Similarly, links with voluntary agencies (92 per cent) and other play recreation and childcare provision (91 per cent); and membership of local partnerships (91 per cent); were seen to be either essential or quite important. Having links with local businesses was seen as important by fewer people, with only 62 per cent thinking this was essential or quite important.

Partnership working and networking were seen as important by all the case study projects and services. Working in partnership opened doors to support and new funding sources and networking ensured managers and projects were up-to-date with all local developments and potential avenues for developing their services. Links were important with local authorities and also with voluntary sector organisations offering a range of services that might impact on children and young people and their play opportunities.

Networking

General networking was also seen as key to sustainability, both with other local organisations in the voluntary and community sector, and with those

providing specific services for children and young people. Networks allow projects to learn from each other, support each others' work, and increase the potential for partnership working.

Local infrastructure support

Having good networks also increases the possibility of tapping into local support. Local voluntary sector support services were frequently cited as important in helping individual play projects to develop their networks and increase their potential for sustainability. Local support and networking also increases opportunities for sharing good practice and learning from each other.

Access to staff training and development was the most important element in local infrastructure support, cited by 96 per cent of respondents; with 69 per cent citing it as essential and 27 per cent as quite important. Also seen as important to respondents was working within the local policy or strategy (88 per cent) and receiving support from play associations and networks (81 per cent).

Two of the case study organisations, Lambeth Play Association and Gloucester Resource Centre, were local support agencies. In Lambeth, much of the play provision had been contracted out to the voluntary sector and the play association had a crucial role in helping develop, support and coordinate this. This support involved help with fundraising, training, registration and linking with local planning agendas. The resource centre offered a similar service to organisations across the county.

Evaluation and monitoring

Increasingly projects are being asked to demonstrate how they are meeting the needs of children and young people or their families. Day-to-day monitoring and evaluating the impact of play provision is becoming more important in its sustainability. In one area represented at the EQUIPE seminar, it was reported that there had been a 25 per cent reduction in antisocial behaviour in one community when resources were put into summer play and activity provision.

Quality assurance also has an important part to play in sustainability. The evaluation of *Quality in Play* showed that having quality assurance helped indicate to potential funders that the project was well run as well as ensuring a better service for children and young people. This view was re-enforced by the questionnaire survey.

When asked, 92 per cent of the respondents indicated that internal monitoring was important for sustainability. This included the use of quality assurance schemes.

Although internal quality assurance, monitoring and the value of policies and procedures were seen as important by the projects and services taking part in

the case study research, the value of Ofsted inspection was seen as less valuable. Although it was important to be seen in a positive light by external inspectors, there was less respect for their abilities and knowledge in understanding children's play needs and the ways in which projects and services were meeting these.

Meeting government agendas

Funding from national and local government is becoming dependent on being able to show that play and other provision for children is addressing government priorities. The government's priorities currently include children's physical and mental health, safety, enjoyment and achievement, contribution to society and social and economic well-being. In addition, the government is funding projects and initiatives that help to promote community involvement and ownership of local provision, and improvements in local parks and open spaces. Being able to show how play provision meets these objectives is very important in its sustainability.

But the need to be seen to address key government policy targets was seen as essential by only 39 per cent of respondents to the survey but as quite important by 50 per cent. Addressing government policy issues was becoming seen as important in sustainability for all the case study projects and services as funding tends to be associated with this. However, concern was expressed that the extended school programme might have a detrimental effect on existing, well-run, well-used after-school clubs already offering children good play opportunities. There was concern that these might be replaced by more structured provision offering childcare with a significantly more formal agenda of education and organised activities.

Workforce development

Supporting and developing the workforce and ensuring staff are trained to the requirements of the inspection process as well as in playwork, is key to the future sustainability of provision.

The questionnaire survey clearly showed the importance of having a skilled, qualified workforce to the future of play provision. Amongst the respondents, having a skilled trained staff team (99 per cent), being able to keep good staff (99 per cent), strong management support (96 per cent), access to staff development and training (96 per cent), and access to volunteers (72 per cent) were all seen as being essential or quite important.

All the projects and services interviewed for the case studies emphasised the importance of having a skilled, committed staff team but some were concerned that it was increasingly difficult to find and recruit trained staff. The low pay and insecure funding arrangements were a problem for some and insufficient numbers of qualified people locally, to meet inspection requirements, were problems for others.

Commitment from the local authority

As most play provision is provided locally, the role of the local authority had been seen to be important in the consultations for *Getting Serious about Play*, at the EQUIPE seminar and in the evaluation of Quality in Play. Respondents to the CPC questionnaire, while feeling this to be important, did not rate it as highly as some of the other factors. Of the respondents, 83 per cent thought that having links with local plans and strategies was important or essential to their future development and 80 per cent thought that local officers' support and political support within the council were important.

Amongst the case study projects and services, views on local authority support varied. Where local authority officers understood the value of the service to children and young people and were enthusiastic about it they were invaluable to the projects. But, in one area, there was an example of the local authority taking direct control of a dedicated post previously funded through the voluntary sector organisation and changing it to such an extent that the local play sector no longer got the full benefit. Local authorities were also criticised for not ensuring that all local groups knew about funding opportunities which could lead to under-spent local authority funds and poorly funded voluntary sector provision.

Marketing

If local children, parents, communities and funders are to support the development and sustainability of play provision, they must know about its presence and understand its value to them. The play sector has much to learn about marketing and promoting its value in order to ensure that funding is continuous and adequate.

5 Conclusions

If children are to be able to play freely and free of charge in their own neighbourhoods there must be public provision for this and significant, secure funding has to come from the public purse – either central or local government. It is unrealistic to expect local play projects to raise sufficient funds from other means to cover all their expenses and to provide the type of quality provision, both staffed and unstaffed, that children of differing ages, interests and abilities need.

However, there are steps that local play providers can take to help them in generating income from different funding sources in the public, charity and private sectors. These involve looking closely at the way their services are run and developing their skills in fundraising, management, staff development, partnership working and internal monitoring. Above all they must be, and be seen to be, meeting the expressed needs of local children and young people and their families.

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Appendix 1: The CPC questionnaire survey respondents

A questionnaire based on the findings of the EQUIPE seminar and the *Getting Serious About Play* consultation findings was circulated to readers of *PlayToday* in the autumn of 2004.

A total of 121 completed questionnaires from across sector organisations were received. These included:

- 39 per cent from voluntary organisations
- 28 per cent from local authorities
- 10 per cent from the private and social enterprise sector
- 6 per cent from other statutory agencies
- 16 per cent from other types of organisation including childminders, education departments and other small charitable organisations.

All the projects were providing services for children and young people but not all describe themselves as play services. Instead, they described themselves as:

- providing a play service only (35 per cent)
- providing childcare only (14 per cent)
- providing a combination of childcare and play (26 per cent)
- providing a combination, including play (14 per cent)
- focusing on other services for children including sport and art (10 per cent).

Almost all the respondents were providing services for children and young people of school age. Some focused their provision on children of primary school age but about half were providing services for children and young people from different age groups.

Most respondents were providing services all year round (73 per cent) and the remainder were providing term-time provision only. Of all the respondents, 26 per cent were offering open-access provision; 12 per cent were providing only for children whose parents were buying childcare; and 34 per cent were providing a mixture of booked and open-access provision.

The numbers of children being provided for by different respondents varied enormously from fewer than 20 per week during term time to over 100,000 a week in the holidays. Of the services provided:

- 35 per cent were for fewer than 50 children
- 23 per cent for between 50–100 children
- 20 per cent for between 100 and 500 children

- 22 per cent for over 500 children.

Projects varied in the length of time they had been in operation: from less than two years to up to 70 years. Of the projects, 25 per cent had been in operation for 2–5 years; 28 per cent for 6–10 years; 20 per cent for 11–20 years; and 16 per cent for 21–50 years. Four services had existed for more than 50 years.

Project and service budgets varied from under £10,000 to over £1 million per year. Their annual budgets ranged as follows:

- 7 per cent had under £10,000
- 19 per cent had between £11,000 and £50,000
- 25 per cent had between £50,000 and £100,000
- 29 per cent had between £100,000 and £500,000
- 20 per cent had over £500,000.

Appendix 2: The case study projects

Kids' playgrounds

The national voluntary organisation *Kids* operates eight adventure playgrounds in London. The playgrounds are primarily for disabled children but are also used by their brothers, sisters and friends and sometimes other local non-disabled children. The bulk of services focus on out-of-school play and childcare provision, typically offering a four-nights-a-week service from 3.30pm to 6.00pm. Some of the playgrounds are also open on Saturdays during the school term and the holidays.

The playgrounds also operate in the school holidays, opening for two weeks at Easter, six weeks in the summer and for the three half-term holidays. During this time the playgrounds offer play schemes to disabled children and their friends and brothers and sisters.

The playgrounds are open to children from five to 16 years old and are registered with Ofsted. The playgrounds are used by approximately 2000 children of whom just over 1000 are disabled. During one year there are in excess of 38,000 child-visits to the *Kids' playgrounds*. In most areas children are brought to the playgrounds by minibus if they cannot get there without this help.

Coram's Fields

Coram's Fields, at the south end of the London Borough of Camden in inner city London, is a 7½ acre site divided into sports pitches, a playground and a number of buildings with different uses. The sports pitches cover approximately two acres and can be used for a variety of games, including football, hockey, cricket and athletics. The playground also hosts a play scheme for the local authority, a youth centre, and provides a nursery and a drop-in centre for children under five and their parents. There is also a small city farm.

Coram's Fields is open every day, except Christmas Day and Boxing Day, from 9.00am until 8.00pm in the summer and from 9.00am until dusk in the winter months. The sports pitches are floodlit and are open until 8.00pm in the evening throughout the year. The play centre is run by the local authority as part of their play and childcare service but works in close liaison with the management and staff of Coram's Fields. The play centre uses one of the buildings and the children have free and open access to the whole of the playground area.

Coram's Fields is used by children from birth to 16 years old; and young people over 16 years old are allowed to use the site if they are using the youth

centre. The outdoor playground space offers a pets' corner, fixed play equipment, open spaces and grassed areas, sand, water and a nature garden.

During term time, Coram's Fields is used by 500 to 600 children a week and during the holidays from 1000 to 1500 children enter the playground depending on the weather. Adults are only allowed into Coram's Fields if they are accompanied by a child.

Coram's Fields is a voluntary organisation and an unincorporated association. It is run by a charitable trust and has been in existence for 70 years.

Log Cabin Adventure Playground: West Ealing

The *Log Cabin Adventure Playground* is an adventure playground primarily for disabled children. It is also open to the children's friends and brothers and sisters and on some days of the week local children can use the playground. Approximately 70 per cent of the children using the playground are disabled or have specific needs.

The Log Cabin Adventure Playground has a large outdoor space with a variety of fixed equipment and natural features. In the summer there is a sandpit and also a 'bed swing' for children unable to use a conventional swing. There is a quiet room, sensory room, soft play room, and other indoor rooms and spaces which contain a pool table and other toys and equipment for indoor play. The playground also has a large kitchen and provides the children with a two-course meal everyday at the after-school club. The outdoor space is approximately one acre. All the children coming to the playground must have places booked for them in advance.

The Log Cabin Adventure Playground provides an after-school club during term time; and holiday play schemes throughout the school holidays. The playground is open all year round except for the Christmas holiday and bank holidays. It does not open at weekends.

The children who use the playground range from four to 15 years old and buses are provided to bring children who have difficulty in travelling by other means. The playground owns two buses and, if they need more spaces, they hire an additional bus from the local community transport organisation.

Approximately 50 children attend the play schemes regularly; and the after-school club is used by 35 to 40 children each day. The playground has a waiting list – especially for children needing one-to-one support – of local families and families across Ealing with disabled children.

The Log Cabin Adventure Playground has been running for 25 years and is based around a building that looks like a log cabin.

Walsall Play Safety Team

Walsall Play Safety Team currently manages around 60 play areas (not staffed by playworkers) offering free, open-access play opportunities to local children and young people. Some of these play areas have existed for 30 years and some are in unsuitable locations insufficiently overlooked and too far from busy areas to be safe for children. Fortunately, a recent bid to the Big Lottery Fund has resulted in the 'Transforming Your Space' programme for Walsall. This initiative has enabled the funding of over 40 schemes, including the provision of new play areas, multi-use games areas, skate parks and youth shelters across the entire borough. Over 40 individual projects are contained within this initiative. This, combined with a recent review of play areas, means that the number will be reduced to approximately 55 or 60 but they will be of higher quality and in more appropriate locations. One of the key functions of the Walsall Play Safety Team is to maintain play areas on a regular basis and ensure that they are not only safe but good places for children for play.

The team tries to offer play areas suitable for children of different ages, as they see this as more sustainable than providing only for children of one particular age group. There are equipped child's play areas for children up to 12 years old; and for older young people there are multi-use games areas, skate parks and other appropriate provision.

The borough has approximately 250,000 residents and the play areas range from small doorstep sites, with a few items of equipment, to major parks, where there is a wide range of facilities for children and young people of all ages. Three of the play areas include open-air swimming areas, which are filled with water during the school summer holidays. These are staffed when they are open for use.

South Lakeland Playbus

South Lakeland Playbus is a mobile play provision which goes round to small villages in the southern Lake District, with trained play and childcare workers offering children play opportunities they would not otherwise have. It is a double-decker bus equipped with resources and equipment for children of preschool and primary school age. The bus has a home corner and a sandpit amongst its resources. They also run a parents and toddler session as well as after-school clubs.

As well as visiting villages on a regular basis, the bus goes to special events within the district when it is open for all children at the event to use. However, the bus does not allow unaccompanied children to use its provision and most of the places are booked in advance by parents.

The Playbus started off as a mobile sports project which took sports equipment to village halls. It then transformed into a Playbus. The bus visits each village on its list one day each week, possibly for a school term. It also visits villages

during the holidays. Sessions usually last for two hours but are sometimes longer depending on the needs of the community. The project has been running since the 1980s.

The children using the project vary in ages, depending on where the bus is visiting and the local need. During term time the bus offers play provision to approximately 90 children and in the holidays about 125.

Approximately 3000 children used the bus in the last financial year.

The Playbus is part of the South Lakeland District Council sport and recreation department and is part-funded by the local authority. They also run a parents and toddler session as well as after-school clubs. The bus is easily recognised in the South Lakeland District.

Lambeth Play Association

The ***Lambeth Play Association*** was set up in the inner-London borough of Lambeth in 1999, to act as a support and resource structure for local play provision. In the borough, much of the play provision is run by the voluntary and community sector. This means that the demand for support information and training from voluntary organisations is high and the Play Association is expected to meet this need. The Play Association has a membership scheme with about 140 members, although it provides advice and information to many more individuals and organisations.

Gloucester Resource Centre

The ***Gloucester Resource Centre*** is a social enterprise that supports many children's organisations from across the county of Gloucestershire. Those using the Centre include groups of disabled people, youth clubs, community projects, arts, dance and theatre projects, and training organisations. The city of Gloucester is one of the country's most multi-ethnic cities and the Resource Centre provides appropriate services and support to ensure local organisations are able to meet the diverse needs of local communities. There are opportunities within the building for many local groups to undertake their own activities, including local groups who operate out-of-school clubs and holiday play schemes.

The Gloucester Resource Centre has been operating since 1986. The project grew from a small base to the size and strength it is now. Throughout its gradual growth and progress, the skills of the staff developed and they were able to increase their fundraising over the years. Though starting small, they developed a business plan that included buying a building which had potential for income generation.

The Centre now owns its own premises and is able to let out rooms to generate income. Initially the building was considered to be too big but, with

perseverance and a collective vision and support from their management committee, they were able to raise the funds and buy and refurbish the building. The project grew and developed slowly over time at a pace the staff and management committee could manage.

The Centre supports projects in all areas of Gloucestershire, including the predominantly rural areas of the county where there are many communities facing disadvantage due to geographical isolation and lack of local services.

The Gloucester Resource Centre is a membership organisation with a diverse range of members totalling in excess of 1000 (as at February 2006).

Spelthorne Borough Council

Spelthorne Borough Council is a public organisation providing play provision across a local authority bordering West London. The authority has recently taken the decision to contract out local play scheme provision. **Kids for Life** run three holiday play schemes during the summer. They provide a total of 1560 spaces. The local authority considers that contracting out the service enables more places to be provided more efficiently.

Holiday play schemes provide a wide range of activities including art, crafts, sports, games and play. As well as offering free play there are structured activities if the children want them. Children from five to 11 years old attend the schemes. Places have to be pre-booked for the children although they are open to all the children in the borough.

Missing Link

Missing Link after-school club is a privately owned and run after-school club. Staff from the club collect children from a number of different schools and take them to the after-school provision. During term-time the club is registered for 60 children and in the holidays the play scheme is registered for 40 to 50 children. The club was set up approximately 15 years ago with assistance from the local social services department although, as a result of changes, this support no longer exists. Children attending the provision are between five and 12 years old.

ABC Club

The **ABC Club** is an after-school club taking place in a primary school. The club takes place inside the school buildings, in a large hall, and the children are allowed to use the playground if accompanied by members of staff. The club only takes place during school term-time at the request of the school staff. Approximately 60 children use the club each week with an average of 32 each day. The club offers activities and games with an arts and crafts table, a book corner, sometimes a television and music. There is also a snack table and a

drawing table. The children are allowed to play freely and do whatever they want from the choices available. In the playground there is also a climbing frame.

The ABC Club has been running since 1996. The school is the registered owner but the club is run by an independent manager. It is paid for through charges to parents and there is no additional funding. Although all the places are booked and paid for, the club also provides space for children whose parents are unexpectedly late picking them up from school.