

# New Deal for Communities

## The National Evaluation

### Research Reports

#### **Delivering Play Spaces in NDC Areas**

Research Report 38

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit is currently sponsoring the 2002-2005 national evaluation of New Deal for Communities. This evaluation is being undertaken by a consortium of organisations co-ordinated by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

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*Sheffield Hallam University*

# **Delivering Play Spaces in NDC Areas**

Research Report 38

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## Executive Summary

- this report evaluates the process of delivering improvements to play spaces in several New Deal for Communities areas. The project was undertaken by members of the Housing and Physical Environment Theme Team at CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University for the National Evaluation of New Deal for Communities. The approach involved discussions with stakeholders in NDC Partnerships, reference to the results of the 2002 NDC Household Survey and two case studies, in Bradford and Norwich
- children's right to play and the need to improve play spaces have been recognised nationally as a priority for many neighbourhoods and communities, particularly deprived areas. Evidence from the MORI NDC Household Survey suggests that the poor quality of open spaces is a prominent issue for residents. The development of schemes for play spaces in several NDCs was a response to early consultation exercises that had indicated play space provision as a priority issue for residents
- any accurate assessment of the needs and demands for play spaces requires NDCs to take into account a range of factors, including the needs of children of different ages and abilities, of different ethnic groups, of parents and guardians, and of the wider community. Thorough local consultation therefore has a vital role in shaping area-wide strategies for play spaces provision, and for delivering specific schemes. Consultation processes should include a wide range of stakeholders and not exclude groups such as older people who have legitimate interests in play spaces. A strategic approach to early consultation is necessary to avoid raising expectations of delivery in places where constraints and barriers may arise
- consultation needs to be directly linked to the delivery of the scheme rather than being based on abstract principles or vague intentions - even if this simply amounts to updating residents on progress. Consultation on specific schemes is therefore most effective when it is tailored to the distinctive circumstances, size and location of the development. Innovative approaches to consultation can bring better results. For children and younger people, arts and crafts projects and organised visits to other play spaces were considered more successful than surveys and focus groups
- effective partnerships between NDCs and stakeholders are essential to ensuring efficient delivery and long-term sustainability of play spaces. Key stakeholders need to be identified early in the planning stage. The partnership between NDC and the local authority is critically important here. The majority of sites and schemes developed so far are owned and managed by the local council. Getting long-term maintenance agreements with the local authority is vital, and such agreements need to be established early in the process. Low maintenance solutions can be explored through design and location, and NDCs may be able to fund maintenance via the local authority by making a deed of gift or a commuted sum
- a range of external funding sources is available for play spaces schemes. Access to these funds for NDCs has been a mixed experience, and the process can be time-consuming. If the success of the application is uncertain, consultation with residents can be risky in terms of raising expectations. NDCs will not be eligible to bid directly for certain grants, such as Living Spaces funding. However, NDCs can support community-based organisations in making bids
- designs that involve local people can help to create a sense of local identity and help to engender 'ownership' of play spaces. The evidence about whether local 'ownership' of play spaces protects them from vandalism and disrepair is mixed. NDCs need to be realistic about what can be achieved here

- NDCs can deter anti-social behaviour in a number of ways including: target hardening; the use of appropriate locations; promoting community 'ownership'; ensuring the continuing involvement of the local community; the use of robust play equipment and infrastructure; and the use of neighbourhood wardens and community policing resources
- play spaces should provide safe environments for children, but this needs to be balanced with providing play that is challenging, fun and will sustain children's interest
- design should be inclusive, especially in the light of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) that will eventually include any adjustments to the physical environment that create a barrier for disabled people. NDC Partnerships need to be aware of the DDA's implications

# 1. Introduction

The poor provision of play spaces for children and young people is a crucial issue for many deprived areas in England. Outdoor play is essential for young children's healthy growth and development and children's right to play is recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991). Good quality play spaces provide opportunities for children and families to meet and interact, to have fun, and can provide valuable learning opportunities. In concert with other environmental improvements, they help in providing a better quality of life for all residents.

In many NDCs and similarly deprived neighbourhoods the provision and quality of play spaces is poor. Under-investment, poor maintenance and vandalism have often been the main contributing factors. The state of play spaces in many NDC areas is characterised by conditions such as poor maintenance; inadequate safety standards; poor provision for a range of different needs, inappropriate locations; and problems associated with anti-social behaviour and crime.

A number of NDC Partnerships have identified these issues and are intervening to make improvements. They face several challenges, including funding, partnerships with other agencies, assessing community needs, promoting community participation, land procurement and long-term maintenance of new facilities. This report aims to provide a better understanding of the issues facing Partnerships, illustrate good practice and suggest ways forward for those interested in developing strategies to improve the provision of play spaces in their neighbourhoods.

## 1.1. Project Approach

The main objectives of the project were:

- to identify the challenges that NDC Partnerships may face in improving the provision, maintenance and management of children's play spaces
- to identify good practice in NDC Partnerships
- to provide NDC Partnerships and other interests and agencies with a framework for developing strategies to improve children's play spaces in their neighbourhoods

To achieve these objectives, the following steps were taken:

- a brief literature review to provide a policy context
- telephone interviews with project managers in eight NDCs where implementation of new play spaces had already occurred
- in-depth case studies in Bradford and Norwich NDCs, to explore issues emerging from the telephone interviews in greater detail
- analysis of secondary and administrative data, including the NDC Household Survey 2003 (MORI)

## 1.2. Case Studies

In addition to telephone interview with eight NDC Partnerships, two case studies were selected to study in more depth issues of process with Partnerships that had delivered new play spaces. Norwich and Bradford NDCs were selected for this purpose.

## **Norwich NDC (NELM)**

The Norwich NDC is situated two to three miles to the west of the city centre and comprises three estates: North Earham, Larkham and Marlpit (the NDC organisation is known as NELM). The population of the area is around 9700, living in mainly social rented housing. There is a high proportion of young people, with about 40 per cent of residents under the age of 26. In the baseline study of the area, carried out by MORI in 2001, play areas were cited as the most important issue to be addressed, with 61 per cent of residents rating the facilities as below an acceptable standard and 50 per cent stating that more play and leisure facilities would be the most important improvement that could be made to the area. As a result it has been a high priority for NELM to improve the play spaces within the NDC.

The play spaces in the neighbourhood had become very run down. Since 2002 NELM have installed six new play areas on the sites of the old council play areas, including a skate park and youth shelters for teenagers. Partner agencies have included Norwich City Council's Green Spaces Department and equipment manufacturers. Consultations took place with local adults and children at each stage of the project.

The play areas have had a positive impact on the children and adults in the area, promoting social interaction and providing a sense of community ownership. New play spaces are well-used and have made a significant difference in the NDC area.

## **Bradford Trident NDC**

Bradford Trident is a Round One NDC Partnership situated close to the city centre. It contains several distinct residential communities and a substantial area of commercial activity. Around 45 per cent of households are owner-occupiers, 36 per cent are social housing tenants and 19 per cent rent in the private sector. The residential areas are densely populated with few open spaces. Over the past year 21 blocks of obsolete local authority flats have been demolished to make way for new housing. The population is relatively stable, and diverse, with 60 per cent of households from a minority ethnic group background, the largest of which is the Pakistani community. Economically, the area is weak, with just 34 per cent of working age residents currently in employment.

The main problem remains the lack of appropriate land for development, and in some areas there is a lack of opportunity for play spaces. Early consultations with the community revealed a need for improved play provision for children and younger people. Early-wins funding was used to install small playgrounds for younger children, which were received favourably by local communities. A master planning exercise provides a strategic approach incorporating open space (including play spaces), lighting and routes and movement. A number of locally-based schemes have been implemented and a major regeneration scheme in Parkside Park is proceeding. The Partnership is also developing a *Living Streets* concept that will create better movement throughout the NDC area by improving the street environment, creating home zones and building a footbridge across the busy dual-carriageway that intersects the area.

A successful partnership approach, thorough public consultation and local resident participation have been the keys to successful strategic and operational delivery of play spaces in Bradford Trident. Partners include Bradford Council's Recreation Department, the Council's Landscape Design Unit and Groundwork (Leeds).

### 1.3. Defining Play and Play Spaces

This study is concerned with the provision and management of outdoor play spaces for children and younger people. This involves a wide range of activities in a wide range of spaces, often dictated by age and ability. The Children's Play Council (2002) defines play as what children and young people do when not being directed by adults. However, a broader definition would involve activities under supervision by adults and organised group activities at dedicated facilities such as playgrounds and sports pitches. Sometimes play is informal, taking place in parkland, woods or streets for example. Our definition of play and play spaces encompasses all these activities and locations.

## 2. The Policy Context

### 2.1. A National Context

The importance of play spaces in enhancing the lives of children and younger people, benefiting the wider community and enhancing the urban environment has been increasingly recognised in national and international policy. Children's right to play is recognised by Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

*"States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."*

In the UK, the Sustainable Communities Plan stressed the importance of good quality public spaces to the sustainability of neighbourhoods and the quality of life for its residents. In the policy statement *Living Spaces: Greener, Safer, Cleaner* the Deputy Prime Minister stated that:

*"Successful, thriving and prosperous communities are characterised by streets, parks and open spaces that are clean, safe, attractive - areas that local people are proud of and want to spend their time in."*

A recent MDRI Survey for the Audit Commission (Audit Commission, 2001) asked respondents 'what most needs improving in your area?' Activities for teenagers and facilities for young children were both ranked above health services, housing and education provision.

The accessibility of play spaces for children of different abilities has emerged as an important policy consideration. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) will eventually cover adjustments to the physical environment that create a barrier for disabled people. This could be an important driver in developing more accessible play spaces. This aspect of the act will come into force in October 2004. The ODPM has recently published *Developing Accessible Play Space: A Good Practice Guide* (ODPM, 2004) as preparation for the DDA.

A range of new funding streams have emerged with the objectives of improving children's and younger peoples play environments. For example, *Living Spaces* offers grants for community-based organisations to improve their neighbourhoods and the *New Opportunities Fund* has recently produced a strategy for delivering £200 Million of National Lottery funds for new and improved children's play facilities in neighbourhoods with inadequate provision (DCMS, 2004). In addition there are a range of Government initiatives that can have a direct impact of play spaces provision. They include the

Children's Fund, Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, Sure Start and, of course, New Deal for Communities.

## 2.2. The Context for NDCs

### Poor Quality Play Spaces: The Extent of the Problem

The NDC Household Survey conducted for the National Evaluation by MORI in 2003 suggested that the issue of poor quality and/or lack of parks or open space was a significant problem. Across all NDCs, 47 per cent of respondents regarded the issue as a problem and 24 per cent thought it was a 'serious problem'. Figure 2.1 shows how the responses varied across the NDC programme. A greater proportion of women considered the issue to be a serious problem (27 per cent) than men (19 per cent), suggestive of the greater role women may have with childcare. Indeed, the data show that 32 per cent of respondents who are parents or guardians of children felt that the provision of play spaces was a serious problem in their area compared with 19 per cent of respondents who are not parents/guardians, illustrating the greater importance placed on this issue by families.

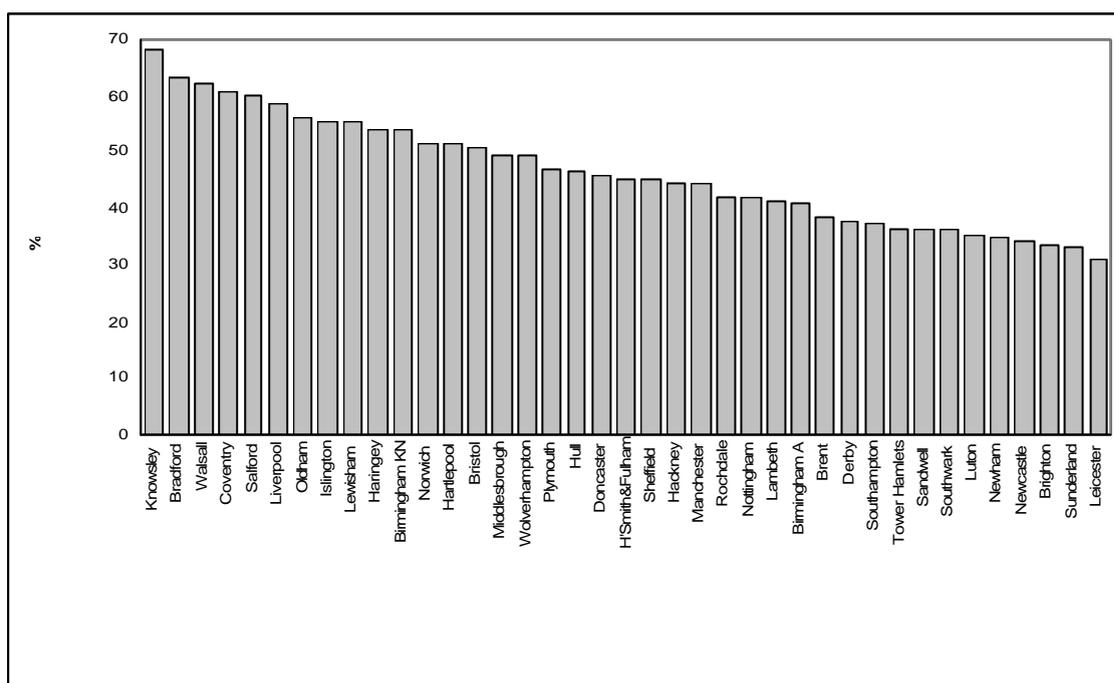
There is a significant difference about the perception of the issue between those who do and do not want to move. 28 per cent of those who wanted to move considered the poor quality of parks and open spaces to be a serious problem. However, only 20 per cent of those who did not want to leave the area considered it a serious problem, illustrating how it can affect people's quality of life. However, other problems in the neighbourhood are usually more important determinants of residents' desire to leave the area (Beatty *et al*, 2004).

**Table 2.1: The Perception of the Quality of Parks and Open Spaces in NDC for those Who Do and Do Not Want to Move**

	<b>% of those who want to move from their home</b>	<b>% of those who do not want to move from their home</b>
A serious problem in this area	28	20
A problem in this area, but not serious	24	21
Or not a problem in this area?	46	56
Don't know	2	3

Source: Mori

**Figure 2.1: The Poor Quality of Parks and Open Spaces as an issue in NDCs**



Source: MORI

The analysis explored whether respondents from different tenures regarded the provision of parks and open spaces differently. There were some, albeit marginal, differences as shown in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2: The Perception of the Quality of Parks and Open Spaces in NDC by Tenure**

Housing tenure	A serious problem in this area (%)	A problem in this area, but not serious (%)	Not a problem in this area/don't know (%)
Social sector	26	22	52
Owner occupier	22	25	54
Private renter	19	24	58

Source: Mori

Social housing tenants were more likely to regard the issue as a serious problem, followed by owner-occupiers and private renters, though the differences are marginal. However, it is interesting to set this finding against the qualitative evidence that suggested it was often the more traditional areas of terraced properties, predominantly owner-occupied and privately rented, that suffered from a poorer provision of play spaces. Further research would be required to assess whether residents living in areas of differing urban form and tenure have differing expectations, experiences and perceptions of poor local environments. There may be scope to explore this issue further in future studies by the Housing and Physical Environment Theme Team.

**Table 2.3: The Perception of the Quality of Parks and Open Spaces in NDCs by Age Group**

Age Group	A serious problem in this area (%)	A problem in this area, but not serious (%)	Not a problem in this area/Don't Know (%)
16 – 24	24	27	49
25 – 34	28	24	48
35 – 44	28	23	48
45 – 54	25	22	53
55 – 64	19	20	61
65 – 74	14	21	65
75 & over	10	18	72

Source: Mori

Table 2.3 shows that a higher proportion of 25-44 year olds regard the issue of poor quality and lack of parks and open spaces as a problem. This group might be expected to place greater value on parks and open space provision, as they are more likely to have children in their household.

### The State of Play Spaces in NDCs

In all the NDCs involved with this study, there was a legacy of poor quality children's play spaces. Some areas lacked play spaces entirely. This was particularly true in older residential areas characterised by rows of terraced properties where play provision away from roads had rarely been developed. In Hartlepool NDC for example, increasingly busy roads exacerbated poor opportunities for play.

*"It's about giving children and young people a place to go...Traffic is now a big issue - cars have made play much more difficult for children."* (NDC Officer in Hartlepool)

Where play spaces did exist in NDCs, respondents stated that they were generally poorly-maintained, often vandalised, in poor locations, contained old and inadequate play equipment and did not meet the needs of children and younger people of different ages and abilities. In many cases, play areas attracted anti-social behaviour and were neglected and under-used by local people.

*"All the existing play spaces are derelict, not maintained and not in the right place as they are not overlooked and there are no people around. The parks are void open spaces, far away from housing and not perceived as safe areas."* (NDC Officer in Southampton)

In some cases the provision of play spaces varied throughout the NDC area. In Bradford NDC for example, one particular small area had no play facilities and there were few open spaces where new provision could be made. This problem was compounded by poor access to open spaces, caused mainly by a major dual-carriageway and the absence of direct pedestrian conduits.

*"A busy road is a physical barrier between both halves of the NDC...We need to develop better linkages between those areas that do and don't have open spaces and play areas."* (NDC Officer)

### Aims and Objectives for NDCs

Respondents from NDCs suggested a wide range of aims and objectives for improving play spaces, from improving the neighbourhood's physical environment *per se* to

improving the situation of local children and younger people. NDCs identified the following aims and objectives:

- to create more play spaces
- to improve those play spaces that exist already
- to improve the quality of life for younger people and children by providing better and safer opportunities for play
- to provide a range of play environments that meet the needs of the community
- to create play spaces that include and encourage all members of the community to use them

A number of NDCs have developed specific strategies to improve play spaces. Box 1 illustrates the key elements of a play spaces strategy put forward by Southampton NDC.

#### **Box 1: Southampton NDCs Play Strategy - Objectives and Actions**

- provide designated play spaces near younger children's homes that are easily reached and overseen
- increase non-car use of the environment
- enhance the sense of security in the environment shared by children, young people and adults
- create opportunities for children and young people to meet and play with due regard to other users of the general environment
- to develop un-staffed sites for the development of play environments for children and young people
- to consider issues around the possible development of an adventure playground

#### **Actions:**

- create secure aesthetically pleasing spaces around residential clusters
- create an individual look for each space
- meet play environment criteria and emphasise access to natural environment
- lighting to allow evening use
- facilities for adults to allow them to meet and be near the children
- convenient easily accessible storage of play materials
- enhanced street lighting
- meeting areas with seating and public art
- traffic calming measures
- establishment of a community ranger scheme
- siting to take account to current congregation areas favoured by children and young people and their views
- meet quality play environment criteria
- ambient lighting
- individual look for each space
- potential adventure playground site to have lighting and ensure the landscape is managed to encourage security
- oversight by the rangers
- further consultation based on strategy paper

Initiatives to improve play spaces rarely existed in isolation, but were elements of larger strategies. In the main, initiatives were linked to physical improvement strategies, youth strategies and more general public space strategies. They were also likely to be elements in the master plans being drawn-up for many NDCs. In Sheffield NDC, improvements to play spaces contribute to “creating a greener and safer environment for residents”, a key priority for the area that meets a number of social and economic goals.

*"We are never going to get businesses to move in or people to buy houses if the area doesn't look or feel good." (NDC Officer)*

In Doncaster NDC, play space improvement was regarded as integral to its youth strategy.

*"We want to develop places where young people can have some fun, get some space, meet friends and form social groups, stop them getting bored and frustrated...The NDC is committed to youth inclusion; and young people don't want to get involved with youth boards and the like, they want activities - things to do and place to go." (NDC Officer in Doncaster)*

It is clear that many NDCs suffered from a legacy of poor or non-existent play provision. Partnerships have identified improvements as a priority area for local communities and have implemented schemes to meet a diverse range of aims and objectives. Box 2 illustrates a range of considerations that may help to define the aims and objectives of play space strategies and schemes.

### **Box 2: Pinpointing Aims**

There are many things to consider when creating a successful play space. It is important to have clear aims and objectives. Think about:

- who is it for - infants, juniors, teenagers?
- is there provision for accompanying adults (seating, picnic tables)?
- is the site located in an appropriate place?
- is it accessible for children of all abilities?
- is it safe?
- how is the equipment going to work together? Suppliers can offer advice about combinations of play equipment
- does the scheme cater for different modes of play: swing, rocker, agility, slide and motor?
- is the area designed to help children interact?
- is the equipment exciting and challenging, and will it hold children's interest?
- is it an attractive site that people will want to go to?
- is it sustainable?

### **2.3. Summary**

- improving play space provision is nationally recognised as a priority for many neighbourhood and communities
- the evidence suggests that many deprived neighbourhoods suffer from poor provision of play spaces, neglect, vandalism, anti-social behaviour and under-investment
- NDCs need to familiarise themselves with the likely impacts of the DDA

- a range of new funding streams is available. NDCs should decide where these are appropriate. While NDCs will not be eligible to apply for some funding, for example Living Spaces, they can actively support applications from community-based groups
- across the NDC Programme, residents regard the poor quality of parks and open spaces as a serious problem, although it was one of the less problematic issues within neighbourhoods overall. However, local surveys often highlight facilities for children and younger people as a priority area
- the aims and objectives of NDC Partnerships for play spaces are child-focused, and outcomes across a range of theme areas can be identified

### 3. Assessing the Need for Children's Play Spaces

#### 3.1. Introduction

As we have stated earlier, play spaces come in many different forms and must meet a range of needs from children and younger people of different ages and abilities. When developing their strategies to improve play spaces, NDC Partnerships have undertaken a range of different activities to assess the need for children's play spaces including:

- public consultation exercises in the local area
- public consultation exercises in specific locations
- consultation exercises with children and younger people
- an audit of existing play facilities
- identification of particular groups whose needs are poorly met, to establish what needs to be done to improve play spaces

This section discusses how NDCs have involved the local community in developing play spaces and goes on to illustrate a range of differing needs that have been identified.

#### 3.2. Community Participation

In all the NDCs involved with this study, some form of initial community consultation had prompted action to improve play spaces. In Bradford NDC for example planning work for a housing demolition and land-use change programme revealed a lack of open space and play facilities in certain areas. This led to the development of a larger master planning exercise which focused on three complementary strategies - open space, lighting, routes and movement.

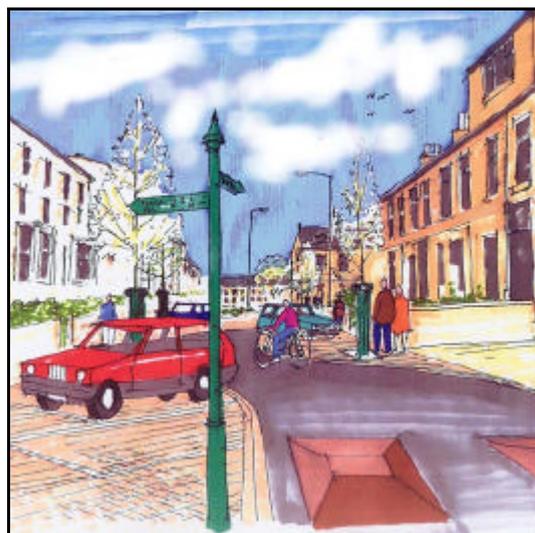
*"The master plan was based upon a huge public consultation exercise. It certainly did identify quite a lack of open space...and with confidence we can say that all the play spaces that we've installed and planned come from the master plan and from public consultation."* (NDC Officer in Bradford)

Taking such a strategic approach was clearly an advantage for Bradford NDC. It provided a thorough assessment of needs in the area and enabled a planned approach to cater for the whole area. It also enabled different strands of environmental initiatives to be planned in a complimentary way. For example, the master plan exercise revealed that the Marshfields area of the NDC had virtually no open spaces and had little potential for new developments. The masterplan has proposed a 'living streets' concept that will improve pedestrian routes to other parts of the NDC, where open space is more plentiful and there are greater opportunities to develop new play spaces. It also

proposes that Home Zones may eventually be developed to provide safer environments for children in residential areas.

*"The area is high density, mainly terraced housing. The bottom end has hardly any open spaces at all. In the future we're looking at bringing play into the areas via Home Zones and similar schemes. Because child accident stats (sic) are so high, we know that there is a big conflict between traffic and child safety and that streets are places where children play especially when there little else." (Council Officer, Bradford)*

### **Box 3: Bradford NDCs Living Streets Concept**



There are several levels to community consultation. While the broad NDC neighbourhood-wide approach enables a strategy to be developed, more detailed consultation is required for individual schemes. The scope of this often depends on the type of play space being developed. For instance a larger park draws people from a district-wide area, whereas a small children's playground may have a catchment area of three to four streets.

### **Involvement through-out the process**

An approach that involved the community directly was seen a critical to the successful delivery of new and refurbished play spaces. The best examples of community participation occurred when local people were involved throughout the process - from assessing needs to designing schemes through to delivering them.

*"It wasn't just a matter of we'll go in and do it, we've actually involved people. By involving them, the community feel as if they've got ownership of what's going on...therefore there a bit of pride there." (NDC Board Member)*

### **Consultation with Children and Younger People**

As the main users of play spaces, consulting with children and younger people is an important consideration, and where it has been done in NDCs it has shaped and refined schemes in-line with their needs and demands. As one respondent stated:

*"Children are often forgotten. They are the least consulted and least involved members of the community. Over an issue such as play spaces, they can really help us develop things that are really wanted and will be well-used." (NDC Officer)*

Children and young people were involved in a number of different ways. In Norwich, officers met with younger people in schools and at community centres. Initially they were given equipment catalogues and asked to choose play equipment they liked and were asked what it was they wanted. Officers then created a number of different scheme examples, based on the preferences of the younger people and a practical view of what was possible. These examples were then taken back to groups.

*"...before we actually commissioned the work we went back with the plans and said 'this is what we can do there with the money we've got; what do you think of it?' We did get some good feedback and did make some changes accordingly." (NDC Officer)*

In Bradford younger people were consulted in a number of innovative ways. In one example a youth group got involved with a stone mason to create carvings for a public space. In Plymouth younger people were taken to other parks, given cameras and asked to take pictures of their favourite parts of these spaces.

*"This brought up ideas that they (younger people) would not have come up with themselves such as imaginary play ideas and landscape play that involved hills and woods. It also gave them the idea of designated teenage spaces." (NDC Officer in Plymouth)*

In Doncaster NDC consultation with young people has been a key part of the initiative. Focus groups were held and Groundwork took children to see different kinds of play spaces. One NDC Officer summed it up well:

*"It's not too tricky. If you want to know what children want, ask them some questions. You'll get good answers." (NDC Officer)*

### **Consultation with Adults**

Consultation with children and younger people solely will not always provide schemes that meet the needs of the whole community. Play spaces are important places for adults also. Parents often supervise children's play; older people often enjoy sitting in areas where children play; and many people will benefit from better outdoor physical environments. Residents are also concerned about the locations of play spaces, often associated with noise and safety issues.

In Bradford a number of traditional consultation methods have been used, such as questionnaires and street interviews. However, they found that these methods were not suitable for all and had to use other innovative ways of engaging communities.

*"Actually, sometimes people don't know they're being consulted. We say 'come and do some painting', or 'come and do some arts and crafts'. Often you have to get away from the questionnaire approach. People don't always respond well to being approached by a clip-board either in the street or at their front door - you will lose about 90% of certain groups in key areas. People tend to respond better to enjoyable activities." (NDC Officer)*

It is also helpful to provide a basis for what is possible and achievable. Consultation exercises that gave residents a 'blank sheet of paper' were considered by many to be less successful.

*"We try to give people a framework of what it's reasonable for us to deliver. There will be some ideas that aren't achievable or aren't sustainable. Freedom has to be given within the bounds of reasonableness." (Council Officer)*

## Potential Risks of Community Participation

Consultation with local residents (including children and younger people) was seen as a positive experience. However, we did encounter several potential risks that Partnerships should be aware of. The most commonly cited example concerned raising expectations in the community. Consulting with the community does not guarantee the delivery of new play spaces. In some areas there had been a history of consulting people followed by poor delivery, leaving people jaded the next time around. It can be difficult for residents to understand fully what is proposed, and they may have fears and objections, some of which may be unfounded. There is also a time element, as one NDC Officer pointed out:

*"It's more than raising expectations about what can be done; it's also about the time things take. We do all the consultations and then they see nothing happening - when really lots of things are being planned, money is being found, tenders being let, planning permission sought and so on."* (NDC Officer)

In Bradford, Norwich and Doncaster NDCs this issue was tackled in several ways:

- 'early-wins' projects were undertaken quickly and this gave the local community a sense that progress and results would materialise
- during consultation residents were given a framework of 'the possible and deliverable', and involved in the difficult details such as safety standards and costs of equipment

*"When I told a group of younger people that this piece of equipment costs £5,500, they genuinely responded and started to consider value for money aspects."* (Council Officer)

- during more prolonged consultation processes on larger projects, NDC officers needed to make an effort to keep people informed. For example:

*"...you have to keep dropping a line to people saying we're making progress. When we applied for planning permission, we sent everyone a letter. Many would have seen it in the paper anyway - this way we build a better relationship with our community."*

- when residents had concerns about new play spaces, innovative approaches were used to promote them (Box 5)

### 3.3. Differing Needs

One of the key aspects for a successful approach to play space provision is meeting the needs of different groups. The most successful approaches clearly identified the needs of different ages and of different abilities. Some respondents felt that the needs of some ethnic groups differed, although there were mixed opinions. In some NDCs there was evidence of territorialism in open spaces, based mainly on rivalry between areas rather than racial or gender distinctions.

Strategies to improve play spaces face several challenges:

- to make provision for a wide range of needs
- to resolve conflicts between a range of needs
- to break-down the barriers of social exclusion and ensure that new schemes do not reinforce social exclusion

## Making Provision for a Wide Range of Needs

All the NDCs involved with this study had, in some way, considered enhancing provision for a wide range of needs. In particular the needs of children and younger people of differing ages were a pressing issue. In Bradford these differences came through in early consultation exercises for quick-wins projects.

*"When we decided to invest quick-wins money in small children's play spaces and did door-to-door consultation, people said 'yes we want something for toddlers, but also we want something for older youths who have nothing to do and nowhere to go'." (NDC Officer)*

The kinds of activities will differ between age groups, which can pose problems for planning and strategy. Bradford's approach was to look at the needs of three age groups - toddlers, young children and teenagers. Their general approach involves providing separate facilities for these groups, although some areas, such as larger parks, did offer opportunities for a more integrated approach.

### Box 4: Youth Shelters in Norwich NDC

Youth shelters have proved to be extremely popular in Norwich. They are relatively inexpensive and fit easily into schemes. They are open sided so that people can see what is going on in them and are usually sited on the periphery of play areas, further away from residential areas and separated from younger children's play areas.

Officers at Norwich NDC suggest that they are most successful when young people do not feel as though they are being watched over and where they can make some noise without disturbing residents. As a result of their installation there are far fewer young people hanging around in groups on the streets.



As children and younger people of different ages have different play space needs, so do people of different abilities. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will place duties on local authorities to ensure that new play spaces are fully accessible to all. Many of the NDCs in the study were aware of the issue, and in general new sites were making provision for children of different abilities. However, the details of how the DDA will impact on play spaces are still poorly understood. Recent research for the (ODPM, 2004) will help to improve this, and should be essential reading for NDCs who seek to develop new play spaces. Advice is also available from *Kidsactive*, a national charity that promotes play for disabled children ([www.kidsactive.org.uk](http://www.kidsactive.org.uk)).

The study aimed to discover whether children and younger people from different ethnic backgrounds had different needs for play spaces and a mixed response was given to this question. There were some who felt that this was not an issue:

*"I don't think that kids have any prejudices; all they want to do is play and at their age there is no real friction."* (NDC Board Member)

*"A children's play area is a children's play area. I don't think it matters what background you come from."* (Local Authority Officer)

However, other respondents felt this was a relevant issue.

*"There are ethnic barriers to break down. It's just as much of an issue for children as adults. There have been incidents of certain groups taking over certain areas."* (Local Authority Officer)

Moreover, some respondents believed that the needs of ethnic groups were poorly understood because of the difficulty in engaging them in consultation exercises. In Bradford NDC consultation exercises with Asian women and younger Asian groups have made a significant impact on the design of new spaces by bringing features such as art and mosaics into public space.

The cultural needs of different ethnic groups are important for NDC Partnerships to take account of. Previous research has found that minority ethnic groups tend to have a low level of engagement with urban green spaces (DTLR, 2002). It is crucial that such needs are properly assessed in order that adequate and suitable provision is made, and that minority ethnic groups are not excluded from play spaces.

### **Resolving Conflicts between a Range of Needs**

The needs and requirements of one group may often conflict with another. NDCs raised this as an important issue when assessing needs and planning play space schemes.

One of the most common conflicts arose where play spaces were located close to residential areas. While close proximity between the home and the playground is an advantage for younger children and their families, other residents may be concerned about noise. This conflict was more apparent over non-standard play spaces. Such as skate-parks and BMX ramps. It is vital for community cohesion that these concerns are taken into account. However some evidence was gathered to show that residents' fear of the unknown can be addressed. In Bradford NDC a temporary skate park was installed to demonstrate to residents that noise and anti-social behaviour would not be problematic (Box 5). In Norwich NDC, the successful installation of youth shelters was partly attributed to locating them away from residential areas (Box 4).

#### **Box 5: Conflict Resolution in Bradford NDC**

The inclusion of a skate-park facility in plans to regenerate Parkside Park in Bradford was a concern for residents living close to the site who feared that noise and anti-social behaviour may affect them. The NDC and the council arranged to loan and install a temporary skate park for a short period. This has changed the minds of many residents who no longer have objections to this particular element of Parkside Park.

To help with the design of the skate-park, the NDC have taken groups of children to see similar facilities and find out what they would like. This consultation will be used to inform the final design.

Another conflict to emerge was territorialism within NDC areas. The majority of NDC areas are a collection of smaller areas, separated by different housing tenures, divided by busy roads and in some cases characterised by different ethnic communities. This has had an impact on play spaces strategies in Norwich and elsewhere.

*"There are territorial gangs in the area, and we know that younger people from one area wouldn't go to another area to use a play space no matter how good it was. This has had an impact on the number of sites needed."* (Local Authority Officer)

However, such barriers are being broken down through community involvement. Organised sports events seemed to be particularly successful.

*"There had been some territorial conflicts...but we had a football tournament recently between kids from all over the area and it was a nice peaceful day. It's about breaking down those barriers - it doesn't happen overnight...organising event and supervising activities is a great way of doing it."* (NDC Board Member)

*"We found that the sports events have been attracting a mix of people for all over the NDC. It used to be three separate estates - no-one would go across the road. Now those boundaries are disappearing and people will use places and spaces wherever they are."* (NDC Officer)

#### **Box 6: Hartlepool NDCs Mobile Play-bus**

In Hartlepool the lack of play provision in the area was addressed by setting up a Play-bus scheme as a short-term measure. This allowed the NDC to address the issue of play for young children very quickly, while longer term play space projects were developed.

The Play-bus runs morning sessions once a week in five different locations across the NDC for 50 weeks of the year. The project provides play opportunities for children under the age of four.

Parents, carers and grandparents are encouraged to stay with their children on the Play-bus so that they can take part in the activities provided alongside their children. The aim is to encourage a greater understanding of their children's needs and better awareness of the value of play within a child's development.

### **3.4. Summary**

- assessing the needs and demands of communities for play spaces requires NDCs to take into account a range of factors including: the needs of children of different ages and abilities; the needs of different ethnic groups; the needs of parents and guardians; and the needs of the wider community
- local consultation has a vital role to play in shaping area-wide strategies and delivering specific play spaces
- consultation should include children and young people; different ethnic groups; families and the wider community
- consultation is most effective when carried out throughout the delivery process. Innovative ways of consulting, especially with younger people, should also be considered

- consultation exercises on specific schemes should be tailor-made for the circumstances. For example, small playground and larger district parks will require different geographical scope
- play space improvements should be child-focused, but NDCs should be aware of conflicts that can occur between different groups

## 4. Delivering Children’s Play Spaces

### 4.1. Introduction

NDCs Partnerships are well placed to deliver new play spaces. Capital works were often funded by NDC grants and through a range of other public sources (although there is mixed success here). Maintenance funding was generally provided by local authorities, in some cases with assistance from NDC monies. Partnerships between NDCs, local authorities, designers and developers were a critical aspect of successful play space delivery.



### 4.2. Working Together

Partnership working is essential in delivering play spaces. The key players alongside the NDCs are the residents, equipment manufacturers and the local authority. In some areas other agencies have been involved such as Groundwork, *Playlink*, architects and designers, youth projects, schools and neighbourhood warden schemes.

Although the projects all involve working with a number of agencies, most NDC officers stated that it was a good idea to have one person with overall responsibility for the project. This was important for driving the project forward and ensuring that it did not get sidelined by other work going on at the same time within the NDC.

Those NDCs that had installed play spaces suggested that it was important to involve all the partners early on in the project. This would ensure that expertise in the various areas could be utilised from the outset, enabling the project to run smoothly. Communications are key as all partners needed to be kept informed of progress and consultation is required with the relevant groups or individuals. It is important to maintain this throughout the project.

When designing play spaces to be maintained by the local authority, it is essential that a close working relationship with the council is developed. Maintenance budgets in most councils are tight, and NDC schemes that increase the quantity and quality of play spaces may have a great impact. Where NDCs have successfully delivered play spaces, agreements have been reached on maintenance at an early stage.

Play spaces strategies need to draw on a range of expertise, including designers, developers, safety officers, police architectural liaison officers, planners and accessibility officers. NDCs have found that many of these skills do exist within local authorities, and that there can be opportunities for buying in to those services.

### 4.3. Capital Funding

The majority of the capital funding for play space projects within the NDCs is being covered by the NDCs themselves. In some cases the local authority has made contributions and some NDCs have been able to secure additional funding from other organisations.

There is often additional work that needs to be done when new play spaces are installed, or old ones renovated, such as cutting back overgrown trees or shrubbery or mending fences. This needs to be taken into account when planning the budget and in many NDC areas the local authorities have been willing to carry out this work. Other capital projects may be required beyond the boundaries of play spaces. In particular, access to sites can be blighted by busy roads and routes from residential areas may be restricted. In Bradford NDC, their play spaces strategy is complemented by schemes to improve routes and movement within the areas for pedestrians. NDCs therefore need to consider capital expenditure beyond the play spaces themselves.

In areas of new housing there may be possibilities for obtaining funding for play spaces via Section 106 agreements between the local authority and developers. This is an aspect that NDCs should investigate further, especially as part of housing renewal schemes involving private investment.

Experiences varied in terms of the success of looking for outside funds to assist with projects. In Southampton the NDC was not able to access any private funds as the play areas were all on council land and it was contrary to council policy to use private funding. Norwich NDC has been looking for additional funding but has found it difficult to access. There was a feeling that they were being excluded from initiatives that might have helped with the work because of the 'special' status of NDC funding.

*"The Sure Start area wraps round our area...but none of this is Sure Start whereas really the area needs to be looked at in Sure Start terms as a whole." (NDC Officer)*

*"Ok, this area's got specific money to do work in the area but it shouldn't be that we're now excluded from any other initiatives that are going on, because although the money comes to this area there are an awful lot of the outside areas that benefit as well." (NDC officer)*

Both Norwich and Bradford have encountered difficulties in accessing any capital funds from the local authority for their play space projects. It is suggested that local authorities will tend to concentrate their resources on areas outside the NDCs as they do not have any additional funding. As a result the Partnerships are both looking to find other sources of funding to help with future work.

*"It's about putting together a package of funding. There are places you can go to and grants to apply for, but it's terribly time-consuming. Also finding them is tricky. There are sites on the internet that help, that give a long-list of bodies that will fund things (www.access-funds.co.uk). It's there but it's very time-consuming. It would be very nice if we could agree that NDC will contribute X and the Council will match-fund." (Bradford NDC Officer)*

Norwich NDC is exploring the possibility of accessing funding from Sport England and the Football Foundation for work on a large community area which will include play and sport facilities. Doncaster NDC has obtained some money from Waste Recycling Environmental Limited (WREN) through Groundwork and Hull NDC is also considering to apply to them for funding. Bradford NDC has been very pro-active in applying for external funding and has now been successful in securing a large part of what they need. This can be a time-consuming process and bid writing is often an acquired skill. One officer warned of the consequences of meeting the different criteria of different funding sources:

*"They've all got slightly different criteria and we've had to redraw the plans and drawings to emphasise different aspects of the scheme in order to satisfy the wide range of funders. This again is time-consuming, and again you get further and further away from the project that you first consulted on." (NDC Officer)*

NDCs themselves are not always eligible to apply for grants from certain funders. Applications may need to come from a community group or a charitable organisation, which can impact on time and requires the necessary support, communication and budget management systems to be set up if they do not already exist.

#### **4.4. Maintenance**

Most local authorities have a budget for play spaces, but this is usually only enough to cover the maintenance of existing areas. As a result NDCs are often refurbishing existing play spaces and the installing new schemes with their own funding, though they may have been able to set up an agreement that the council would then cover the maintenance costs of the areas. The issue of long-term maintenance of play areas is crucial if the spaces are to continue in good repair and be of valuable use to the local community - not just for the life of the NDC but well beyond.

Norwich NDC stressed the importance of establishing the maintenance agreement prior to embarking upon the project. It is also important to establish exactly what the maintenance involves (Box 8).

*"I think get something in writing from the council. There is actually a document which is an agreement which is signed by NELM and the council which agrees to the maintenance and is linked in with the standards of maintenance that they will apply to the play equipment, so I think it's important to get that formally agreed." (NDC Officer)*

### **Box 8: Norwich City Council's Maintenance Inspection Checklist**

1. Ensure safety surfaces are clean and sand/bark is topped up to original level
2. Monitor play equipment to ensure it is free of any defects:
  - any breaking/bending/cracking etc of structure
  - cracks/corrosion etc of surface finish
  - sharp edges/protrusions/exposed mechanisms
  - worn bearings, seizure, excessive/noisy motion, lack of lubrication
  - loose/broken guard or hand rails
  - missing/broken/loose rungs, steps or treads
  - missing or damaged swings, insecure fittings
  - cracked seats
  - loosening ground or cracked foundations
  - missing/damaged fencing
  - wear on chains
  - missing/damaged gates
  - vandalism which may result in injury
  - irregularities in ground covering
3. All faults to be reported within two hours of inspection. Any item which is found to be dangerous to be immobilised and warning signs erected immediately.
4. All equipment to be maintained to manufacturers' instructions.
5. Other tasks: cut grass, empty litter bins, control weeds, prune hedges.

In some cases refurbishment of an area will result in a bigger area or more pieces of equipment with different maintenance needs to those previously in place and this should be taken into consideration. In Bradford, for example, the NDC has made an arrangement with the council to contribute to maintenance costs in some areas.

*"Sometimes the council will agree to a little bit of extra maintenance costs, and sometimes we've (NDC) had to find it. We've gone the way of making a 'Deed of Gift' where NDC gifts to the council a sum of money every year for maintenance of a particularly scheme." (NDC Officer)*

However, once old play areas are renovated maintenance costs are often fairly low. Good play equipment suppliers now produce equipment which is robust, tamper-proof, inflammable and easy to clean. The company which supplied equipment to both Bradford and Norwich NDCs stressed that, in thinking about play spaces, a priority is for equipment to have an economic life. High quality equipment together with well thought out design can keep maintenance costs to a minimum.

*"Be very careful not to confuse the two things, maintaining what I call the economic life of the equipment and maintaining equipment that's beyond its economic life. They are at totally opposite ends of the financial scale. The majority of our equipment I would say the economic life is between 10 and 20 years, depending on the area." (Equipment supplier)*

Local authorities usually have maintenance budgets based on the number of existing play spaces. This means that problems can arise when new areas are proposed. The resolution of these problems will vary. Some spaces may be on council land whereas others may be on land owned by the NDC itself.

### **Box 9: An Example of Annual Maintenance Costs (Norwich City Council)**

The cost of grounds maintenance for each site ranges from £2,490 to £7,950 per year depending on the size of the area.

In addition, each site should have the following inspections:

- three yearly structural inspections costing £47 each
- one annual inspection costing £49 each

Bradford NDC has installed some new sites on council land and has been able to negotiate an agreement with the council as detailed above.

Norwich NDC has devised an innovative plan for maintaining the play and sport area which they are developing on their own land, in order to ensure that it continues beyond the end of the programme. Part of the site will be sold to a housing developer to provide a capital receipt and part will be an employment zone which will be leased out to provide an income stream for the community facilities to be provided. The NDC is planning to cover the maintenance of the site with this income, with the possibility of expanding this maintenance service so that it could take on the contract from the council in order to maintain the play spaces on council land in the future.

*"I think from the management side, in the longer term what we want to look at is having our own taskforce if you like, to actually manage the sites. At the moment the city council runs it through a maintenance contract which it operates through City Care, but in the longer term, because NELM is now a significant landowner, largely because of this site, we'll set up our own maintenance team which would provide training and employment for local people. We're not there yet but that's something we want to work towards." (NDC Officer)*

Insurance also needs to be taken into consideration. Spaces on council land will usually be covered by the local authority's public liability insurance. However, this needs to be investigated when new schemes are planned.

During the resident consultations in Hull NDC an aerial runway was requested. However the insurance costs proved to be prohibitive and the plan had to be abandoned. NDC staff encountered similar problems when investigating the insurance costs to cover work that the NDC had done in one of the parks in the area. This was resolved through negotiating with the local authority and a set annual figure annually is now paid to the council towards maintaining and insuring the area, with the agreement that the local authority will 'adopt' the area in the future.

## **4.5. Project Management**

Installing a play space can be a prolonged procedure and for most NDCs it will be a new area of work. Local authorities often have a lot of experience and knowledge about installing and managing play spaces that NDCs should access. In some cases the authority may be willing to take on the actual management of the project. In Norwich the NDC provided the funding, was involved in the consultation exercises and followed the project's progress. However, experienced council officers took on the day-to-day management role.

*"I think it's been useful as far as this project's concerned that the council were willing to take on the project management of it as opposed to NELM having to do that because it would have been another learning curve for them...I think it could*

*have been a lot worse if we hadn't had people in the council willing to take on 'the project' and deal with all the day to day stuff." (Council Officer)*

Establishing the financial arrangements and the grant application process is very time consuming and it is important to sort out these aspects at the start of the project, in order to prevent delays at a later date.

*"Get your facts right, get the basis right first, especially the financial bit. People get so caught up in the project and what they're going to do and what they're not going to do that they don't always think about the practical things like we say about the maintenance, like the future maintenance, what's going to happen, and like the finance." (Council Officer)*

#### **4.6. Summary**

- effective partnerships between NDC and local authorities are a key factor in ensuring the long-term success of new play spaces. Management and maintenance responsibility will, in the majority of cases, rest with the local authority. If agreements on maintenance cannot be reached, questions arise in terms of value for money, safety and long-term sustainability of neighbourhood environments
- it can take a long time to organise the funding for the project, and the procedures need to be established before embarking on consultations and extensive plans. Subsequent delays waiting for the confirmation of funding can cause frustration to both the project team and residents
- use the existing expertise that is available within the local authority
- it is possible to access external funding for capital expenditure but be aware that this can be a lengthy process and that different sources will want different aspects of the project to be emphasised (for example the Football Foundation fund areas with football pitches, the Countryside Agency fund areas of parkland, woodland and naturalised landscaping)
- written agreements of maintenance arrangements should be established at the beginning of the project
- insurance coverage and possible costs should be checked when drawing up a scheme
- maintenance costs need to be taken into account when deciding on the equipment, type of surfacing and site design

## **5. The Design and Location of Play Spaces**

### **5.1. Introduction**

The design and location of play spaces for children and younger people is a complex process, but it is critical to the success of play spaces. Good quality physical environments contribute to children's development and help to improve their quality of life. When planning and designing play spaces Partnerships should be aware of a range of issues - including safety, accessibility, conflicts between different activities and the potential impact of anti-social behaviour.

This section assesses the challenges faced in NDCs. It is not a definitive guide to creating successful play spaces, but a number of good practice guides now exist. A good place to start is the Children's Play Council's *More Swings than Roundabouts*:

*Planning for Outdoor Play* (CPC 2002) that aims to help local people and agencies “come together to create sustainable, exciting and attractive places to play”. More recently, *Developing Accessible Play Space: A Good Practice Guide* (ODPM, 2004) aims to improve the accessibility of play spaces that enable all children to be with and learn from each other, and especially enable disabled children to access play spaces to help them and their families build relationships and neighbourhood networks that can bind communities and promote social inclusion.

## 5.2. Designing Successful Play Spaces

In the two case studies, Bradford and Norwich, as well as other NDCs in the study a lot of effort has been devoted to designing play spaces that provide safe and fun environments for children and younger people. Moreover, strategic approaches are helping to ensure that new play spaces are sited appropriately, and that due thought is given to the suitability of the location of existing spaces.

There are many aspects of design that make play spaces successful and it is clear that a 'one size fits all' approach does not work.

*"What is a successful play space? I don't think you can just answer it just like that. It's a whole multitude of things."* (NDC Officer)

The differing needs of children of various ages and abilities have already been discussed, and some respondents emphasised that play spaces often needed to segregate toddlers from older children.

*"Lots of things make a successful play space. One of the things is having the right equipment in the right area. It's no good just putting lots of junior equipment if it's toddlers who are users. So you've got to understand why you are putting a play area in and what do you want from that play area. Not all play areas are the same, you may want a play area for excitement, but you may need it for children with disability. So you don't just look on a play area as just bits of equipment, it's so much not that, it's about thinking about why you're trying to achieve it."* (Playground equipment manufacturer)

Clearly defined areas for supervised play, particularly for younger children, have several advantages. They provide safe boundaries within which children can play, making it easier for parents or guardians to be aware of their whereabouts and to prevent dogs from causing danger.

While segregation does have some advantages, respondents were keen to promote inclusive play for children of different abilities: this is a key challenge for design. New requirements under the DDA make this an even more important consideration for Partnerships.

*"We want to integrate children - whether the needs are for physical, mental, visual or hearing disabilities. We want to meet them without restricting able-bodied children. It can be a compromise, but is possible with good design."* (NDC Officer)

Good design in this case has been aided by innovative play equipment that can provide for many different needs, but there are also other aspects to consider:

*"It's not just about the equipment, it's about access to the area, it's about colour, tactile surfaces. In fact, the equipment hasn't changed that much in ten years - it was always accessible. A particularly successful piece was picked by a local resident and it just happens to suit the DDA guidelines. It's a big multi gym which*

*children can access, you can sit with a carer, it's also got the panels you can touch, it's made in different materials so you've got texture, you've got sound, it moves, it stimulates." (Playground equipment manufacturer)*

Above all, the need for play spaces to provide challenges was a concern when designing schemes. Play spaces that are not challenging and do not hold children's attention for long may not be used and may be abused.

*"...whatever age group you go for, no matter whether it's toddler or it's teens, it has to be challenging, if it's not, they'll get bored and once they get bored of it they're going to destroy it. So in anything to do with play today it has to be something that motivates them." (Local Authority Officer)*

In both the case study areas, residents were directly involved with design. Several new play spaces in Bradford NDC were enhanced by the participation of residents in arts and crafts projects. Artists were employed to work with local groups to make schemes more appealing. This was seen as an effective way of extending consultation, but also of involving people in the actual development process. It has made schemes more appealing, and given them a local and unique identity.

### **5.3. Safety and Enjoyment**

Creating designs for all children should include adherence to a variety of safety guidelines and standard, and should support active experimentation and risk-taking without being unsafe for children.

*"It is possible to design exciting play-spaces, but the tendency is to make them too safe. You can see the extremes of this in the USA where play spaces have signs on the equipment about how to use it. Play should be about an element of risk, otherwise it'll be boring and neglected." (Local Authority Officer)*

Notwithstanding this observation, it is possible and desirable to minimize hazards in the physical environment. Soft surfaces around play equipment are now commonplace, though not universal. Creating boundaries between roads is now a typical practice, and in more informal settings for young people, location away from houses and roads was often cited as a way of overcoming conflicts.

In Southampton NDC, for example, safety and location are major aspects of the play spaces strategy.

*"Safe streets and safe surroundings are the most important issues in the provision of play areas. There is a big problem in the area with the quality of the housing which is very poor. All the existing play spaces are derelict, not maintained and not in the right place as they are not overlooked and there are no people around. The parks are void open spaces, far away from housing and again not overlooked or perceived as safe areas." (NDC Officer)*

This highlights the issue of safe access to play spaces. How children access play spaces is crucial to their safety and to the usefulness of the play space. Older children may go out to play alone, and busy roads, lack of crossings, play spaces in isolated areas and long distances may deter them, and may also deter their parents.

*"...the streets and surrounding area needs to be designed so that (children) can get to other play spaces safely." (NDC Officer)*

Developing safe access for children in the neighbourhood can have a number of benefits for other theme areas, particularly health and education:

*"Some work will be done on one of the parks in the next financial year. It's the main access route for children going to school and we'll improve the main access point and encourage children to walk to school rather than being driven there."* (NDC Officer)

There is some evidence suggesting that parental and children's concerns about safety in the local neighbourhood can restrict independent mobility and the opportunity for free play. These fears can be due to heavy traffic and dangerous roads, a fear of strangers or the poor quality of play environments. One local parent referred to her fears that children would come across dirty needles in the park and said she was unwilling to let them play there. As a result they played on the street and quite often 'got into trouble' with neighbours about noise and the nuisance caused by ball-games. The creation of safe play spaces can help to address these issues.

#### **5.4. Tackling Anti-social Behaviour**

Anti-social behaviour has an impact on play spaces in different ways. Inappropriately located play spaces can cause noise and disruption to others; they may be dominated by certain groups to the exclusion of others; and they may become the focus for anti-social behaviour and crime involving drugs and alcohol. Vandalism is also common.

One solution to deterring anti-social behaviour is target-hardening, restricting access to play spaces at certain times.

*"...it was apparent that some of the residents were concerned about teenagers going in [the playground] in the evenings because it's quite isolated. So gates were put in there and our community wardens are responsible for locking them in the evenings, and so far we've not had any reports that there've been any problems in there in the evenings."* (NDC Officer)

The location of play spaces can also prevent anti-social behaviour. In general, respondents said that spaces should not be located in isolated areas, hidden from view. However, this preference must be balanced against the needs of younger people for a degree of freedom and self-determination in public areas - otherwise the spaces will simply not be used.

*"...the worst (play spaces) were the two that were secluded. Changing the location has made a hell of a difference to be honest, I'm amazed but it has. But I think that's because of all the hard work we've put in."* (Local Authority Officer)

The study explored how 'ownership' of public space by residents could help to safeguard it. If local people have a stake in a new development they may have more care for it. Respondents did see a virtue in engendering ownership, but the benefits tended to take the form of increased community involvement, kudos for the NDC and the wider engagement of hard-to-reach groups. The evidence for 'ownership' helping to safeguard play spaces from ASB and crime was more mixed.

*"Involving the community is definitely part of our ethos, but it only takes one or two people to vandalise something. ASB may only be a few people. It's great when the community take ownership - but doesn't work in all areas."* (NDC Officer)

*"...it would be nice to think that the community can self-maintain and manage new play and open areas; but they can't. But they can play a role in the process."*

Despite these reservations, there was some evidence that new play spaces did not suffer from vandalism if community involvement had taken place.

*"The consultation exercises we do go a long way to getting people to have ownership of these new places. For instance, [play area] is in a very tough neighbourhood and after three years it's as good now as when it was installed."* (NDC Officer)

Ongoing involvement has also had an effect.

*"Using the new play areas as focal point for community activities has also played a role. Again our strategy is a joined up one with our community outreach work. We like to do summer schools every year - things like artwork in the Park keeps people involved and actively using the areas."* (Local Authority Officer)

Some NDCs referred to the need for robust design and equipment that could stand up to "hostile urban environments". Wooden equipment was regarded as unsuitable, whereas steel-framed play apparatus and railings were a more sustainable option. In Bradford NDC, the council's involvement in the partnership had provided local design expertise.

*"Robust equipment is vital. Our experience of working in Bradford over many years really comes in. We know what works and what doesn't. Certain flimsy items must be avoided; wooden equipment runs the risk of being burnt-down. Design has to be robust and sustainable for Bradford's urban environment, which is a fairly tough one."* (Local Authority Officer)

In a number of NDCs, neighbourhood wardens, park rangers and community police officers played a part in patrolling and maintaining play spaces. They can provide a link with local authority maintenance teams to report problems. One NDC respondent believed that keeping on top of maintenance and repair helped to reduce vandalism on sites.

*"It's like 'broken-windows'. If there is vandalism it will likely attract more. So we try and deal with thing quickly - and hope."* (NDC Officer)

## 5.5. Summary

- designs that involve local people can help to create a sense of local identity and help to engender 'ownership' of play spaces
- design should be inclusive for children of all abilities
- designs and locations of play spaces should provide safe environments, while providing challenging play opportunities
- design and development often need to extend beyond the boundary of play spaces. For example, it is important to think about pedestrian access to sites
- anti-social behaviour can be tackled in a number of ways including: target hardening; appropriate locations; promoting ownership; involvement of the local community long-term; the use of robust play equipment and infrastructure; use of neighbourhood wardens and community policing resources

## 6. Conclusions

NDC Partnerships have a great opportunity to improve the provision of play spaces within their areas. Delivering new play spaces is a complex process, but NDCs can take a lead in consulting with local communities, providing and leveraging-in funding, and steering the development process. This report shows that the benefits of such improvements can have an impact on local communities across themes - on housing, environment, health, education and crime. For an NDC Partnership the delivery of new play spaces can stand as a visible sign that positive change in the neighbourhood is possible, and that the NDC can deliver it.

In the two case study areas it is clear that success was based on effective partnership working, particularly with local authorities, and thorough community consultation and participation. Both NDCs had robust strategies for providing a range of play spaces that cater for children and younger people of different ages and abilities.

The importance of play and the need to improve play spaces has received national recognition and new resources are becoming available. However, as in other aspects of the NDCs work, funders can feel that Partnerships already have sufficient resources through their 'special' funding. Despite this view, other funding streams are needed and Partnerships should ensure that funding agencies understand their purposes and the limitations that budgets confer. NDCs have invested capital in play spaces, but the major benefit of NDC involvement comes through the ability to be strategic, to lead partnerships, to undertake community consultation and to manage the development process.

In all the NDCs in the study, inclusive play was a high priority objective. The new arrangements of the DDA will come into force in October 2004, and information on its impact is emerging. NDCs should familiarise themselves with this, and look to involve specialists in Partnerships. It will be prudent to work closely with local authorities for which the DDA will have a major impact.

The case studies in Bradford and Norwich NDCs illustrated good practice of assessing the needs for play spaces in their areas. Consultation practices were innovative and ongoing throughout delivery, and strategies for play spaces were efficiently integrated with a range of measures to improve local environments. Designing and locating play spaces was undertaken in partnership with local communities. The evidence suggests that 'ownership' of schemes is strengthened by such involvement and this has a range of benefits - including capacity building, local identity, greater trust in the NDC and the inclusion of different, often hard-to-reach, groups. The impact of wider ownership on anti-social behaviour and vandalism is more mixed and NDCs need to be realistic about what can be achieved here.

One critical aspect of the strategy is the relationship with the local authority. The long-term sustainability of new play spaces is highly dependent on maintenance. NDCs should ensure that partnership arrangements with councils are made that ensure maintenance is possible in the long-term. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the lack of such arrangements is often the main barrier for NDCs. While capital funding and delivery can be problematic, the lack of any clear maintenance strategy will undermine any gains within a short period. Strategies can ensure that schemes are low maintenance that they are commensurate with the local authority's strategy for play, and that negotiations about maintenance take place early in the process. This may need to take place before local consultation is undertaken, as this might raise the expectations of local people. In a number of cases, NDC funding has been channelled to local authorities to meet maintenance costs. This is a valuable method for overcoming barriers, but both NDC Partnerships and local authorities should strive to ensure that

play spaces adequately meet the needs of the community and are sustainable in the long-term, beyond the life of the NDC. If this can be achieved, such agreements would be the essence of that elusive objective - mainstreaming.

## 7. References

Beatty, C., Cole, I., Grimsley, M. and Hickman, P. (2004) *Housing and the Physical Environment: Will residents stay and reap the benefits?* NDC National Evaluation. Sheffield, CRESR.

DCMS (2004) *Getting Serious about Play - A Review of Children's Play*. London, DCMS. (Available at <http://www.culture.gov.uk/>)

DTLR (2002) *Improving Urban Parks, Play Areas and Open Spaces*. London, DTLR.

ODPM (2004) *Developing Accessible Play Space - A Good Practice Guide*. London, HMSO.

### 7.1. Useful Organisations and Web Resources

#### Living Spaces

Living Spaces provides grants to help people improve open spaces in their neighbourhood and create valuable places for the whole community to enjoy. It can help you create and improve a huge range of spaces including: play areas; community gardens; local parks; village greens; nature areas; kick-about areas; ponds; courts and squares; and city farms.

Spaces must be open to the public and near to where people live. Grants of up to £25,000 are available to community-based organisations. A network of trained Living Spaces Enablers will be on hand across the country to assess application and help deliver projects.

[www.living-spaces.org.uk](http://www.living-spaces.org.uk)

#### Groundwork

Groundwork is a leading environmental regeneration charity making sustainable development a reality in the UK's poorest neighbourhoods. Every year Groundwork Trusts deliver thousands of projects in neighbourhoods which are blighted by high unemployment and crime levels, poor public health, run-down housing and public spaces, waste ground and struggling businesses. These projects aim to improve things in three ways: for people - creating opportunities for people to learn new skills and take local action; for places - creating better, safer and healthier neighbourhoods; for prosperity - helping businesses and individuals fulfil their potential.

[www.groundwork.org.uk](http://www.groundwork.org.uk)

#### Urban Parks Forum

The Urban Parks Forum (UPF) is a not-for-profit organisation set up to help those committed to the planning, design, management and use of public parks and open spaces. Generally recognised as the voice of parks and green space, UPF is a membership organisation dedicated to promoting the importance of public spaces whilst increasing awareness of related issues. UPF first came into being to promote the regeneration of public parks and open spaces in towns and cities throughout the UK and to support the investment being made in these important social and cultural assets. [www.green-space.org.uk](http://www.green-space.org.uk)

## **The Civic Trust**

The Civic Trust inspires and promotes improvements in the quality of urban life for everyone throughout the UK. It is devoted to enhancing the quality of life in Britain's cities, towns and villages: the places where people live, work, shop and relax. The Civic Trust creates and develops partnerships between government, business and communities to help deliver improved local environments. They also set high standards of design and sustainability and recognise, and reward, the very best through the annual Civic Trust Awards and the Green Flag and Green Pennant Awards schemes. [www.civictrust.org.uk/ctru/ctru.shtml](http://www.civictrust.org.uk/ctru/ctru.shtml)

## **The Wildlife Trusts**

The Wildlife Trusts partnership is the UK's leading conservation charity exclusively dedicated to wildlife. Their network of 47 local Wildlife Trusts, alongside a junior branch, Wildlife Watch, work together to protect wildlife located within towns and the countryside. The Wildlife Trusts care for over 2,560 nature reserves; from rugged coastline, to urban wildlife havens. With more than 413,000 members, and unparalleled grass roots expertise, The Wildlife Trusts lobby for better protection of the UK's natural heritage and are dedicated to protecting wildlife for the benefit of future generations. [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)

## **WREN**

Waste Recycling Environmental Limited (WREN) was established in 1997 as a response to the Landfill Tax Act 1996. WREN is a non-profit making environmental body that takes all the Landfill Tax Credits generated by the Waste Recycling Group Limited (the Landfill Operator) which it uses to fund community based projects eligible under the scheme. This includes play spaces. <http://www.wren.org.uk/>

## **Kidsactive**

Kidsactive, a national charity that promotes play for disabled children. It provides publications, an information service, and a national training and consultancy network to promote accessible play. Kidsactive works in close partnership with the full range of professionals who provide services for disabled children. [www.kidsactive.org.uk](http://www.kidsactive.org.uk)

## **Playlink**

Playlink works with local communities to support provision of high quality opportunities for children's play that are stimulating, inclusive, and fun. It supports service providers across the country, promoting and disseminating the values and play-work practice learnt in the free play environment of adventure playgrounds. <http://www.playlink.org.uk>