



London Play Briefing

October 2007

Starting up a new adventure playground

New adventure playgrounds will be springing up all over the place with BIG Lottery funding; here we look at some ideas about the siting and management of them. Funding is not the subject of this briefing, but a good adventure playground will cost a lot in revenue funding, Glamis Adventure Playground in Tower Hamlets won the 2007 Adventure Playground of the Year Award, the playworker there, Ian Macintyre reckons they need over £100,000 a year to do a proper job, others get by with less, but cannot offer as much.

Geography and site ownership

Most adventure playgrounds in London started more than 30 years ago when land was cheap, and councils owned more than they knew what to do with.

The first issue is location, location, location, it's got to be in the right place for children to use, near where they live, in a deprived (of usable and appropriate play space) area, and in a place where parents and kids think it's safe, and with good sight lines to home and good street lighting, so local knowledge is crucial. A street frontage is best, it's not so good if it is behind another building or lots of trees or a hill and out of sight, as parents are reassured if they can see into it. A site that looks good may not be so inviting in the dark when it's raining, so check on adequacy of street lighting.

Once a site is identified, a long-term lease will be needed; the National Lottery now wants a 20 year lease for large scale projects. A legal covenant against sale or change of use will be even better. Some existing adventure playgrounds operate without any clear title or lease, as this has historically suited the local council, which owns the land.

Your best chance is park, public open space or housing department land which cannot be built on. Many adventure playgrounds in London are in parks, but good relationships with parks management is crucial to success, as is the siting within the park. A recent posting on the UK Playworkers email discussion group gave an example of a park management which required 28 days written notice of a campfire, clearly not a sympathetic approach! Distance from existing services (gas, electric, water and drains) may be a factor which can add substantially to costs if not on an existing road, which usually carries them.

Some adventure playgrounds have never achieved their full potential due to being wrongly sited, too far from housing or out of sight. Some Housing Associations are quite proactive about supporting play, so they may be able to help, and many are big

enough to have revenue funding to put in as well, if you can convince them it will improve local attitudes towards children.

Other good land owners will be church, mosque, other faith group or scouts and guides, or perhaps an old independent youth club who all have sizable land holdings. The only new recent adventure playground in London, Somerford Grove in Tottenham, did a deal with the Scouts to rebuild their old Scout hut into a new adventure playground; Scouts got a brilliant play area to use two nights a week, and their own room in the new building, Haringey Play Association now have a permanent office base within the building, with no more office rent to find, and with no danger the council will sell off the land from under them as has happened in other boroughs such as Westminster.

Planning permission

You cannot start a development without planning permission. Local residents have a right to object, and may do so. However objections to planning proposals can only be considered if they comply with planning conditions and guidelines set by the council and Government. They also have to be based on fact rather than assumptions or anecdotal accounts, so a suggestion that there will be anti-social activity or behaviour is simply that, a suggestion.

A recent problem in one London borough has seen a planning department suddenly telling an adventure playground they need permission each time a new play structure is built. This is daft, so ensure planners understand from the outset that an adventure playground's structures and buildings will constantly evolve and change.

All new fences over two metres high will need planning permission.

Tony Chilton has had a lifetime of experience working on and planning adventure playgrounds; he has also been a councillor on the local planning committee.

- Proposed sites should be soil tested for contamination (sites offered for "recreational" use by local authorities may have no commercial value because of problems with previous history concerning its use). A number of adventure playgrounds are sited on land that was previously used as land-fill and have serious methane problems which are costly to deal with. Scrutiny of previous usage is a must, details can be found in the territorial department of a local planning office.
- Play areas, including adventure playgrounds, ideally should be located on regular pedestrian flow routes and away from busy traffic routes, located within the accepted pedestrian travel range of young children (they should not have to rely on their parents being able to take them).
- Level and flat sites are not necessarily the best, topographical features, including undulations, mounds and hollows make for a more stimulating and imaginative play potential.
- Details of underground supply lines and utility pipes should be sought through the council or mains utilities suppliers all of whom should have detailed plans of their service lines. (Digging deep holes to accommodate the traditional telegraph type construction, could prove very dangerous if you come across an underground cable!).

The community and the people in it

Inter-estate (or inter-street) rivalry is going to happen in some places and not in others, when I was a kid in Lancashire it was which bonfire making gang you were in. If a site is within or very close to one estate, it will be more likely to be seen as “their territory” so an in-between or neutral site will reduce territoriality.

An adventure playground will only serve one community, and a minority of children, so if it is a new development, it needs to succeed as a “demonstration project” to encourage more, in the longer-term. There is no point in hoping it may solve a long-embedded local rivalry, or be a panacea for other social ills in a deprived area, so don’t allow others with these agendas to divert you to solve their problems.

Mike Wragg teaches Playwork at Leeds Metropolitan University, and was involved in setting up a new adventure playground in Bradford, he says: “When looking for premises we benefited from teaming-up with a couple of voluntary sector organisations. This helped to spread the cost, woo the local authority officers who liked the partnership working, and broaden the range of funding opportunities that were available to us. We also very quickly realised the importance of outreach work. During the very early stages we spent a lot of time walking around the local estate, using the amenities and drinking in the local pub. As a result, we recruited a number of volunteers, placated any up-tight residents and got to understand the 'laws' of the area. We also established a play policy that clearly stated that children using the playground will incur injury. This allowed conversations about risk and challenge to develop and seemed to discourage the 'no-win-no-fee-brigade’”.

Again local knowledge is going to be crucial to success. Youth workers, especially detached workers should be able to advise, and it is generally best for the youth and play services to work in tandem, as much of their work overlaps. Other partnerships can be forged with primary schools (one of the very first in London, Triangle in Kennington, Lambeth, was started by Marjorie Porter, the headmistress at the adjoining Ashmole primary school in (we think) 1955 and both she and the playground still survive). A school can help to dissolve local rivalries and the adventure playground can offer extended school activities.

Parental involvement is important too, a failing adventure playground will only attract parents who want to make a compensation claim, or park the kids while they party. A good community development approach would have a parents committee seen by the neighbourhood as the driving force behind the establishment of the new adventure playground, not a distant official or a trendy outside activist with a political agenda. The adventure playground will rapidly gain a reputation in the area, which you may not necessarily know about, but if only the “Shameless” parents let their kids go there, it is unlikely to flourish.

Community Support Police Officers are another potential partner, their remit is community reassurance, not crime fighting, so the thoughtful ones and their management at the Crime and Community Safety Partnership will be allies, this will also provide reassurance to parents.

A new-build area is a good place to start a new adventure playground, which should be free of traditional rivalries. If you can get in on a regeneration initiative, it may provide funding as well.

Nick Jackson director of Haringey Play Association has masterminded the only recent completely new Adventure Playground in London at Somerford Grove just behind the Tottenham Football Club ground. Here he gives ideas about the local community: Having support from local people is very important, both residents and 'professionals' in the area. The Scout leader (the new building is on the site of the old scout hut) at Somerford Grove helped us a lot with some of the more sceptical residents because he'd been around a long time and they trusted him. We didn't want to be seen to be 'dropping in from outer space' telling people that we knew best what was needed in their area.

The consultation with local children and young people, through the local primary and secondary schools ('Can I Say Something') was brilliant because it meant that they were involved meaningfully from the beginning. We set up a steering group of local professionals - Sure Start, Council Neighbourhood Management, schools, etc - and regularly leafleted and talked to residents, keeping them up to date and explaining what we were doing. Also we ran a training programme as part of the construction, aimed at skilling-up local people in the building trades - not very successful and hugely expensive in the end - but we were 'seen' to be doing something positive. We also had a number of local volunteers helping with bits of structure building and gardening-type activities.

It really is all about community and making your place within it...

Buildings

Remember it is a playground you are building, not a play centre; some of the best adventure playgrounds have cheap, low quality buildings, because the funding is spent on the outdoor playground and staff to manage it instead. Parks may have redundant buildings, which can be converted at a fraction of new build costs, as foundations and services are already in place, but be wary of accepting a site in the "wrong" place, as it may not thrive.

Tony Chilton has suggested that serious consideration is given to tailor-made steel container buildings. They are externally inaccessible when not in use, have a lower maintenance profile, are considerably lower capital cost than conventionally determined buildings, do not have designers/architects fees, can simply be plugged into local utilities, can even be classed as "temporary/mobile buildings," for planning purposes, and can incorporate carefully designed external features which allows use of the roof for play (such as launching area for an ariel runway, climbing nets etc. all of which can be removed when not required).

A design brief for a proposed new development in the London Borough of Lambeth, written a few years ago, is available as a separate download from the London Play website: www.londonplay.org.uk/document.php?document_id=1071.

Age groups to be catered for

Another is to start only with the youngest age range, and gradually work up as they grow up. Do not allow staff to imagine they can be youthworkers, some (especially the youngest or most macho staff) will be more comfortable working with teens than tinies, as they have things in common. Failing adventure playgrounds (I've seen a few) invariably lose the tinies and become low-quality teenage youth clubs, staff will protest that they are helping those most in need, but will turn out to have few youth work contacts or skills. 30 years ago many adventure playgrounds in London were plagued by older kids who dominated them - by focusing solely on "childish" things like making dolls houses and stopping the teen discos etc which some staff encouraged, they were gradually changed to children only places that a self-respecting hoodie wouldn't go near for fear of ridicule, unless collecting his little sister.

Staff

Run a mile from those who think they will set up an alternative utopia for kids, they will get disillusioned and leave when it falls apart. Rely on a team, not a visionary individual - community development theory says it has to be from grass-roots up, not from the top down. Strong leaders who do succeed turn out to also be excellent judges of character who can inspire as well as delegate, in other words, they are team leaders.

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