Play Pathfinders and Play Builders Programme Evaluation

Research Report – RR 231

May 2013

SQW

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Overview

1. In December 2007, the previous Labour Government announced in the Children's Plan that the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) would support local authorities to 'transform local areas into innovative and adventurous play spaces' for children. Subsequently, in 2008 the Play Strategy confirmed that, between the financial years of 2008-9 and 2010-11, £235m would be distributed across all 152 top-tier local authorities (30 'Play Pathfinders' and 122 'Play Builders') in England, weighting delivery to the most deprived areas. The long-term goal of the strategy was to ensure 'every child and young person has access to enjoyable, safe and stimulating play opportunities within local communities that respect play'.

2. In mid-2008, DCSF commissioned SQW to lead a consortium (including Ipsos MORI, three universities and the Office for National Statistics) to deliver a national evaluation of the Play programme. The purpose of the evaluation was to understand the impact of the £235m investment on children's and parents' satisfaction with and use of play spaces, as well as wider outcomes linked to child health and wellbeing and impacts on local communities, and to assess value for money. The SQW consortium designed a logic model for the evaluation framework, and adopted a more intensive mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis for the Play Pathfinder evaluation than for the 'light-touch' Play Builder review (reflecting differential levels of public investment).

3. In 2010, the incoming Government reviewed the 2010-11 Play programme budgets to identify potential savings that could help contribute to tackling the budget deficit, and grant funding to local authorities was reduced. In order to allow flexibility in a time of reducing budgets, the (renamed) Department for Education committed to not impose unnecessary spending constraints or burdens of monitoring on local authorities. In light of these policies, the national evaluation of the Play programme was ended early, after baseline and process evidence had been collected but before the year-on-year impact of the programme could be assessed through a further collection of data.

4. The main outputs from the evaluation up to its termination comprise the following:

- Children and Parents' Experiences of Recently Improved Play Areas - Qualitative Research (DCSF-RR089, March 2009) www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RR089
- Play outcomes for children and young people: literature review to inform the national evaluation of Play Pathfinders and Play Builders (DCSF-RBX09-06, March 2009)

www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RBX-09-06

- Play Pathfinders programme evaluation: interim evaluation report to the Department for Education (February 2011)
- Findings from the Play Builders 2009 implementation case studies: report to the Department for Education (March 2011).

Department for Education

Play Pathfinders Evaluation: interim report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

1. SQW and Ipsos MORI are pleased to present this interim report of the evaluation of the Play Pathfinders programme to the Department for Education (the Department). It provides a summary of findings to date from the Play Pathfinder evaluation. At this stage of the evaluation, there are no findings on the impact that has been achieved by the programme. The report comprises the key outputs from the scoping phase of the evaluation, key findings from two waves of fieldwork that investigated how local authorities are implementing the programme and headline survey findings that give the baseline position against which impact will be measured at the end of the evaluation.

2. In December 2007, the Children's Plan announced the Government would spend £225 million (subsequently increased to £235 million) to support local authorities in the development of exciting public play areas and new adventure playgrounds/play parks. The investment will result in approximately 3,500 new or improved play spaces, and 30 new adventure playgrounds being delivered between 2008 and 2011. The £235 million is being distributed through two linked programmes: Play Pathfinders and Play Builders.

3. The key aims for the overall investment programme – that is, both Play Pathfinders and Play Builders – are:

   - investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits
   - the close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space as a core part of the delivery process
   - play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally
   - play areas that are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children
   - that play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally
   - local authorities develop top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning
   - in pathfinders, that new adventure play sites are staffed and appropriately supervised by play workers

- local councils work to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play.

4. The Department commissioned the current evaluation of the Government's programme of investment in play to establish the effects of the programme on children and young people, families and local communities and to provide cost-benefit information to assess value for money. This is a three-year evaluation that commenced in July 2008 and will complete in March 2011. The overall aim of the evaluation is to evaluate the effects of the Government's £235 million investment programme in public play areas and new adventure playgrounds on children and young people, families and the wider community.

5. The five main elements of the methodology for the Play Pathfinders evaluation are:

- A scoping phase, including a literature review, early research in seven improved play areas and development of the evaluation framework
- Impact case studies, including a longitudinal survey of children and their parents, play area observations and audits, and qualitative research with children and their parents
- Implementation case studies, comprising three waves of interviews with local authority staff
- A review of local level secondary data
- A cost-benefit analysis.

Key findings from the scoping phase

6. The scoping phase began in July 2008 with the start of the evaluation and was completed in May 2009 with the development of the research tools and the evaluation framework. The key outputs from the scoping phase were the literature review, the early research into the likely impacts of improving play spaces and the evaluation framework.

Literature review

7. Academics from the Institute of Education and Roehampton University were appointed by the evaluation team to review the literature on play, identifying the benefits of play and how these can most appropriately be measured and evaluated.

8. Play can be viewed on many levels in terms of its outward signs and apparent demands on social, emotional and cognitive functioning. There is a general consensus that play contributes to the well-being and health of children in different

ways, most notably the development of spatial abilities and senses, cognitive skills, emotional health and social functioning and happiness in adulthood.

9. Research on play outcomes is inherently difficult because of the contextual, elusive and fluid nature of play. The available research on play outcomes tends to focus on quantifiable, physical effects at the level of the individual child. Other possible effects of play are often more difficult to measure, especially when they concern effects on social behaviour and well-being. It has proven difficult to demonstrate a causal relationship between play and these types of outcomes, with the effect that findings tend to state that play 'can help with' various phenomena without providing conclusive proof that it does.

10. There is strong evidence that physical activity acts as a natural preventative to childhood obesity and promotes good health. However, not all outdoor play is physically active and even active forms of play are likely to be characterised by intermittent physical activity. From the limited evidence, we can infer that play is one possible way in which children engage in physical activity, but in itself play cannot be linked directly to physical health benefits. This emphasises the importance of creating play spaces that allow children to play in physically active ways. However, it is difficult to ascertain from the available literature precisely which types of provision are of greatest benefit.

11. The design of play spaces needs to take into account children's age-specific needs and interests. Conventional playgrounds, consisting of structured, pre-fabricated components are criticised frequently in the literature. They tend to cater to the needs of boys more than girls and do not support children with disabilities. They are also viewed as seeking to control children through spatial segregation. Adventure playgrounds are seen as a preferable model, consisting of more open-ended elements and play possibilities which epitomise 'natural play'. They cultivate sensorial perception and enjoyment, support explorative and experimental impulses and contribute to social contacts. In the literature, play in natural settings or with natural elements has been shown to be beneficial to children's well-being. On the other hand, children, when asked, also say that improved facilities and equipment would entice them to use play parks more, reflecting a tension between some users' expectations and 'good' design principles for play space development.

12. Children in the target age range (8 to 13) are subject to a number of important transitions – educational, social and biological – which are likely to impact upon and shape the ways in which they engage with play provision. In conceptual terms, play for this age group shares many characteristics of play in younger children (exploratory, spontaneous, with self-imposed goals and involving risk taking, for example). However, there are characteristics that are specific to the age range, such as play organised as games and team activities, an increased desire to 'hang out' away from adults and play-fighting.

13. The prevailing view in the literature is that the most important influence on how children play is the attitude of adults towards children and the play they choose. Differences between adult and child attitudes to play may exist where adults are in supervisory roles. There is a fine balance to be struck between adult involvement in enabling positive play experiences and involvement that restricts or interferes with children's free and self-expressive play. One study concluded that training is essential if adults are to understand the best ways to support children's own self-initiated activity and encourage risk-taking in a safe and stimulating environment.

Early research into the likely impacts of improving play spaces

14. Research was carried out at seven play areas across England that had recently received investment and redevelopment work (but not through Play Pathfinders or Play Builders). The purpose was to understand the impact of the improvements on the perceptions and satisfaction of children and parents and to identify lessons for the current programme of investment in play provision.

15. The purpose of the research was to understand the impact of the improvements on the perceptions and satisfaction of children and parents and to identify lessons for the current programme of investment in play provision. It shows that the redevelopment of the selected play areas resulted in increased volumes of users and the introduction of new users, including disabled children. It also suggests that successful play areas need to cater for all ages, but in so doing they need to ensure that younger users are not intimidated or frustrated by the presence of older children.

16. On-site safety was found to be very important to local authorities, parents and children alike. When redeveloping play areas, it is important there is adequate visibility into and across the site – through the choice of the location and the play area's design. However, on-site supervision was felt by parents to be the best method for increasing feelings of safety. Parents were also concerned about safety on the travel routes to the sites, which, it appeared, had not been a focus of local authority planning.

17. The variety and wide age-appeal of the play sites was an important success factor from parents' and children's perspectives. The following aspects were particularly important:

    - Equipment that allows multiple users, such as basket swings
    - Scary ("in a good way") or challenging equipment, particularly climbing equipment, high pieces of equipment and ones that allowed children to travel quickly
    - Equipment that can be used in a variety of ways, including role-playing equipment and large pieces of equipment

- Equipment and space designed for ball games
- Indoor equipment and activities, which extend the range of the play offer, but also mean that play areas can be used throughout the year
- Wider facilities, such as toilets, seating and cafés.

18. Gender differences emerged strongly, with boys showing a strong preference for more physical activities and girls (particularly older ones) more likely to use equipment socially.

19. Having a natural-looking and pleasant environment was valued by both parents and children; it helps to support family use of the play areas. Poor drainage of sites was a problem and led some parents not to let their children use the site in winter months.

20. In many cases, the play areas seemed to have contributed to a stronger sense of community. This starts with the involvement of the local community in designing play areas. Users also enjoyed local community events held on the play sites. In addition, socialising and meeting new friends was one of the main reasons for going to the play area for both parents and children.

21. The location of a play area affects the type and frequency of usage. Compared with destination sites, community sites are used more regularly, but often for shorter periods of time. Parents wanted a greater range and variety of activities at destination sites to justify the visit. Some children said they preferred a play area closer to home, even one of inferior quality, as they would get more opportunity to use it and (when older) it would give them more scope to visit without a parent.

Evaluation framework

22. We have used a 'logic chain' approach to inform our overall approach to assessing and evaluating the impact of the programme. A logic model provides a framework for describing the theory, assumptions and evidence underlying an intervention and 'links outcomes (both short and long term) with programme activities/processes and the theoretical assumptions/principles of the programme'[1].The logic model developed for this evaluation is shown in Chapter 2.

23. The Department wished to measure progress against 25 outputs and outcomes through the evaluation. These comprise ten outputs, eight immediate programme outcomes and seven wider programme outcomes, which are listed in Table 1 below.

[1] WK Kellogg Foundation (January 2004) Logic Model Development Guide

Table 1 Programme outputs and outcomes

Outputs	Immediate outcomes	Wider outcomes
(1) Increased supply of play facilities	(11) Enhanced use of play spaces	(19) Reduction in criminal/anti-social behaviour in and around play spaces
(2) Increase in quality of play spaces and facilities	(12) Enhanced satisfaction with play facilities and spaces	(20) Increase in participation of children in physical exercise
(3) Improved access to a variety of play spaces (Play England guidance)	(13) Enhanced positive perceptions and attitudes towards outdoor play	(21) Increased participation in other types of physical activity
(4) Improved supply of play workers/professionalising the workforce	(14) Enhanced feelings of safety in accessing play spaces	(22) Reduced levels of obesity
(5) Improved maintenance of sites	(15) Reduction in perceptions of bullying in and around play spaces	(23) Improved emotional health and well-being
(6) Integration of play into LA planning and policy	(16) Increase in participation of children in outdoor play	(24) Increased community cohesion
(7) Improved road safety/less traffic in proximity of play spaces	(17) Improved risk-taking skills in managed environments	(25) Enhanced social networks among families with children aged 8-13
(8) Involvement of children, families and community in design and delivery of play spaces	(18) Greater involvement of children in the local community/children feeling they have a bigger stake in the community	
(9) Improved co-ordination with voluntary sector organisations to deliver supply		
(10) Involvement of voluntary sector in maintenance and running of play spaces		

Key findings from the impact case studies and local area reviews

24. Chapter 3 presents summary findings from the baseline impact case studies and the baseline local area reviews in order to address the first two key objectives for the Play Pathfinder evaluation:

- To provide evidence on outputs and outcomes for children and young people, and their families, that have resulted from the investment in play provision
- To provide evidence on outputs and outcomes for the wider community and local area that have resulted from the investment in play provision.

Baseline impact case studies

Usage of and satisfaction with play spaces

25. During school terms, around three-fifths of children visit a play area each week, with children making around three visits per week on average. These figures increase a little during school holidays, but not greatly. It is somewhat concerning that children

do not use the play spaces more during school holidays when they have more free time; this may be because some children do not choose to do so or because their parents choose not to allow them.

26. Older children (aged 11-13) tend to visit play areas less frequently than the younger children (8-10), which was especially the case for girls. In addition older children tend to visit play areas with friends, peers or siblings, in contrast to younger children who tend to attend play areas with a parent.

27. Younger children tended to be more positive about their local play areas than older children and also than parents. Also boys tended to be more positive than girls about their local play areas. This suggests that the existing play areas are designed primarily for use by younger children and for boys. It reemphasises the need for the redeveloped play areas to plan for a diversity of use by different age groups, genders, and adults as well as children.

28. Children from more deprived areas tend to visit play areas more frequently than children from less deprived areas. However, children in more deprived areas tend to be less satisfied with their local play areas than children from less deprived areas. It is not clear what underlies these findings. If high satisfaction is a proxy for the quality of play spaces, then the finding suggests historic inequity in levels of investment in play spaces for more and less deprived areas, something to be investigated in the follow-up research. The findings do suggest that local authorities and partners in less deprived areas should do more to promote outdoor play, and that in more deprived areas there is a need to improve children's outdoor play experience.

29. Interestingly, children with a disability tend to use local play areas as much as children without a disability. Importantly, however, satisfaction levels were notably lower for children with a disability. In terms of facilities designed for children with disabilities, almost none of the surveyed play sites provided toilets with disabled access or notices in Braille, widget or pictorial form. On the positive side, three-quarters of sites surveyed contained paths wide and smooth enough for wheelchair access. Nonetheless, the findings emphasise that there is considerable room for improvement in planning for the use of play areas – in terms of access and play experience – by children with disabilities of different types.

Facilities at play sites

30. Three quarters of surveyed Pathfinder sites were existing play sites selected for redevelopment, and only one quarter had no play equipment at all and only basic facilities. Most of the existing sites with play equipment had only a few traditional items. On the positive side, most sites included some natural features and the majority provided seating for adults from which they can observe children playing.

However, very few had any leisure facilities or other public amenities for adults and, related to this, the majority of survey respondents thought that the provision for all the family was poor. Encouragingly, existing sites selected for redevelopment received lower satisfaction ratings than local play areas in general, suggesting that the right sites have been chosen for development.

Safety at play

31. High proportions of respondents (between 39% and 54%) thought that the play area scheduled for redevelopment (i.e. undeveloped site) was unsafe as a place for children to play; this was particularly high among parents of 11-13 year olds (54%). Such concerns should be considered by local authorities who have been required to address issues of safety when selecting sites for development. The degree of unease varied by location and gender, and the factors contributing to it go beyond investment in play sites alone. Feelings of danger were more common in more deprived areas than less deprived ones, and girls felt more at risk than boys. The issue of safety at play warrants close attention, both in planning the redeveloped play spaces and after the spaces have been created. Currently safety issues are likely to present an obstacle to achieving the aims of the programme.

32. Both the survey and the audits of play sites suggest that there is considerable room for improvement in the maintenance of existing play areas. Half of the children aged 11-13 surveyed thought the play sites were not very clean. The audit found that litter was a problem at just under half of the play sites, including hazardous debris at a third of play sites. There was also illegal graffiti at just under half of the play sites. There was a strong correlation between satisfaction with the tidiness of a play area and overall satisfaction. This too, therefore, is an area that requires close attention both in the planning of play spaces and the maintenance of developed sites.

Wider impacts of outdoor play

33. One aspiration for the wider impact of the programme is that it will generate more positive attitudes towards outdoor play. The baseline survey findings indicate that there is little scope for improvement in this regard. More than nine in ten of the parents surveyed thought that regular outdoor play and playing sport is very important for children and young people's health and development. These levels were high among parents of both boys and girls and parents from different ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that parental attitudes to outdoor play will not act as an obstacle to the achievement of the programme aims. The factors that do impact on the level of children's usage of play areas, as revealed by the baseline fieldwork, are levels of satisfaction with the play area and perceptions about the levels of safety at and en route to the play areas.

34. A second aspiration for the wider impact of the programme is that children, families and the community will be involved more in the design and delivery of play spaces. The predominant view among respondents to the baseline surveys was that the local council does not listen to children and young people or their parents. This view varied little by social grade, level of deprivation, gender or ethnicity. It will be interesting to observe whether this changes after the play sites have been developed, as most local authorities have reportedly attempted to engage children and young people and their families in this work.

35. A third aspiration for the wider impact of the programme is that there will be increased community cohesion and enhanced social networks among families with children aged eight to thirteen. The baseline survey results show that there is considerable room for improvement in this regard. Two thirds of parents felt that existing play areas do not provide a good place to meet and chat with other parents, and only one third of respondent children had made a new friend at their local play area. Parent respondents tended to think that the play areas were not places where people from different backgrounds mix together, although there appeared to be greater mixing of people in more deprived areas.

36. A fourth aspiration for the wider impact of the programme is that there will be an increase in children's participation in physical exercise and other types of physical activity. The baseline finding was that between two-thirds and three-quarters of children participate in sports and other activities outside of school at least three days per week. Girls lag behind boys in this regard, particularly at the older end of the target age range. In addition, children from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to engage in physical activity outside of school. These re-emphasise the need for local authorities and partners to deliver play areas that are attractive to a broad range of users.

Baseline local area reviews

37. The local area reviews (LARs) provide a compilation of contextual indicators and play-related outcomes indicators for each of the 11 case study Pathfinder local authorities. We will update them with the latest available data near the end of the evaluation in order to identify changes that might have been brought about by the Play Pathfinder programme. The summary of findings below describes the broad baseline environments that exist across these case study authorities.

38. The 11 case study Pathfinder local authorities are a cohort with considerable diversity in most of the measures included in the LARs. In terms of the size of the 8-13 year old population, the case study areas range widely both in absolute and proportional terms. In terms of economic activity, most of the case study areas are below the national average, but four are not. Deprivation is the one dimension by which the case study areas are united in that they are all among the most deprived

half of local authorities in England. Nonetheless, there is still a wide range, from the 5th most deprived local authority to the 155th. There is also a degree of commonality with regards to anti-social behaviour, for which nine of the 11 case study areas were above the national average. In terms of educational achievement at Key Stage 2, the 11 case study areas include high and low performing areas, as well as two areas at the national average.

39. The more important half of the LARs for measuring the immediate effects of the Play Pathfinder programme is the play-related outcome indicators. With regards to the level of usage by children of local parks and playgrounds, the cohort includes areas both above and below the national average. On the other hand, satisfaction levels with local parks and playgrounds are below the national average in most of the case study areas. It is interesting to note that these data echo the finding from the baseline impact case studies that the level of satisfaction with public play provision does not necessarily correspond with the level of their usage. In terms of children's participation in physical activity, the case study areas vary little around the national level. The already-high baseline level for this measure will mean that it will be difficult, with any degree of confidence, to note any significant change over the lifetime of the programme. With regards to children's health and well-being, levels of childhood obesity are above the national average in all but one of the 11 case study areas. As for bullying at school, most of the areas have levels above the national average. On the positive side, most case study areas exhibited a greater prevalence of emotional well-being among their children than the national average. In terms of children's involvement in the local community, most of the case study areas were below the national average and the remainder were only marginally above this level.

Key findings from the implementation case studies

40. Chapter 4 presents summary findings from the implementation case studies in order to address the third key objective for the Play Pathfinder evaluation:

    - To provide information on how the investment programme is being implemented by local authorities and examples of good practice in the provision of play spaces to inform further development of play policy and spending plans by local authorities and government.

41. Evidence is drawn from the first two waves of implementation case study visits to Play Pathfinders covering 15 local authorities in Wave 1 (October to November 2008) and 18 local authorities in Wave 2 (June to July 2009). The final wave of implementation case studies will take place during spring/summer 2010. Evidence gathered during all three waves will contribute to the assessment of progress and ultimately the success of the investment programme against the following eight DfE programme aims.

Investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits

42. All Pathfinders conducted some kind of mapping of play spaces in their area, mostly during the development of Play Strategies, Green Space Strategies or audits undertaken for the Big Lottery Play Programme. Most Pathfinders included local authority and non-local authority owned/managed sites in their play audits. The resulting play area classifications covered a wide range of factors, including type of play provision, accessibility, condition, journey time, user age, size and equipment, and levels of usage.

43. Criteria for selecting sites for investment varied in some respects between the first and second years of the programme for a majority of Pathfinders. In the first year, pragmatic investment decisions were often made in order to invest Pathfinder funding in a dozen sites by the end of March 2009 and secure 'quick wins'. Year 2 sites in general were likely to be new sites (as opposed to refurbished existing sites), take longer to deliver, and involve more complex issues (e.g. planning permission, site decontamination).

44. The process for selecting the adventure playground site was somewhat different to sited play areas. The most common approach was to use data drawn from an audit or mapping exercise and score potential sites against criteria typically including deprivation levels, accessibility, transport links, and catchment area. Project steering group or board members and elected members selected were often involved in deciding the most appropriate site for the adventure playground, indicating a more top-down approach for this higher-profile development.

The close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space as a core part of the delivery process

45. Pathfinders have engaged in wide-ranging consultation activities in order to secure the close involvement of children, families and communities. Whilst such activities were more evident in Year 2 than in Year 1, it is clear that all Pathfinders recognise the importance of involving these groups as a core part of the delivery process. Broadly, Pathfinders have involved five groups in different ways in the selection, design and delivery of new and refurbished play spaces: children and young people; parents; wider community (including elected members); voluntary and community sector; and mainstream agencies.

46. Given the limited time available in Year 1, many Pathfinders found it necessary to prepare suggested designs and then consult on these. Most Pathfinders reported that consultation activity lasted longer and went deeper in Year 2 because there was more time to consult before site development work had to begin. The most common methods of involving children were public events, supervised planting activities with

children and road shows. Some Pathfinders have gone further, and involved children and young people directly in Pathfinder management decision making.

47. Pathfinders have also been concerned to secure wider community support for particular developments, and also encourage more positive attitudes towards play in general. Opposition was mostly isolated to one or two sites and generated by a few local residents or particularly vocal individuals. Continued community consultation and engagement and also negotiating compromise solutions to address local grievances were regarded as the most effective ways to tackle local opposition.

48. Consultation activities for adventure playgrounds have been somewhat different. Adventure playgrounds draw from larger catchments so there is a need to consult more widely and to involve community stakeholders and groups as well as individual children and their parents. They have a higher profile and more ambitious goals, and offer play opportunities which may challenge some local residents' preconceptions about play and young people. Greater time and effort have therefore been required to secure community support and ownership.

Play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally

49. Many Pathfinders considered the quality and play value of play spaces and facilities would have been considerably poorer without the Pathfinder investment. The design principles promoted in *Design for Play: a guide to creating successful play spaces* (Play England 2008) were widely used by the Pathfinders. Pathfinders thought that full accessibility is a key element in the design of high-quality play spaces. Several have adopted special design features to ensure all children have full access. Moreover, all of the case study authorities have encouraged greater use of the play areas developed with Play Pathfinder funding, in order to promote outdoor play to all children.

50. During the second wave of case studies, most Pathfinders reported greater use of developed play areas than before, suggesting that children find these sites attractive. They also offered early evidence of the positive benefits resulting from greater take up of the play opportunities:

- anecdotal evidence from parents and local residents about how much children are enjoying the new or refurbished sites
- anecdotal evidence of people feeling positive about visible investment in their area
- lower than expected levels of vandalism because young people have more to do

- children using play areas without fences more frequently than previously fenced areas (e.g. on journeys to and from other destinations).

51. However some negative impact of greater use of play areas was also reported, including increased vandalism on new play equipment, increasing amounts of litter, and also complaints from local residents about noise and inappropriate use of the space by young people.

52. These findings reflect the need to maintain the high quality of developed sites by arranging ongoing maintenance. Maintenance arrangements for many areas have yet to be finalised, and several Pathfinders expressed concern about meeting additional on-going costs associated with play areas built with natural materials and bespoke equipment.

53. The *Design for Play* principles are also informing Pathfinders' procurement processes. Several have distributed the guidance to their suppliers and also applicants for Pathfinder funding, and they have used the guidance when assessing bids.

Play areas are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children

54. Pathfinders are taking into account the needs of specific groups in the design of play areas, and most have identified meeting the needs of girls, children with disabilities and ethnic minority groups as being particularly important.

55. Many Pathfinders have targeted girls in their consultations with children, for example by working through Brownies or youth groups, and the results have influenced the design of play spaces.

56. Most Pathfinders have consulted with children with disabilities and their parents, working through special schools or more widely through community organisations. They have found that parents of children with disabilities often need support to develop an acceptance of challenge and risk in outdoor play for their children.

57. The original Pathfinder plans asked local authorities to identify how they would make sites inclusive of children from minority ethnic groups. However, there was a feeling that Pathfinders did not find it useful to think in terms of a single 'BME' group whose needs should be met. Rather, Pathfinders might have very specific groups within their community that have traditionally been hard to engage, and play is providing opportunities to change this.

Play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally

58. Pathfinders generally took a holistic approach to improving the safety of children on their way to local play areas. These combined both physical infrastructure developments with developing children's road safety awareness, and involved cross-departmental collaboration.

59. Pathfinders appreciated the importance of developing play areas which encourage the development of risk-taking skills within managed environments. This reflects a generally enlightened approach to managing risk, which encompasses raising public awareness of the benefits of risk-taking on the one hand and in some cases considering liability issues and negotiations with insurers on the other. All Pathfinders implemented a risk-benefit approach to risk management rather than attempt to eliminate risk altogether. Most have also sought specialist advice on risk and challenging play during the design process. In doing so, Pathfinders have taken into account the needs of specific groups, including children with disabilities and their families.

Local authorities develop top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning

60. Pathfinders regarded establishing strong strategic links with internal local authority departments as being essential to securing the long-term future for play. All of the case study local authorities have integrated play into other areas of local authority planning and policy through their play strategies. In around half of the case study authorities, other departments were represented on core play management teams, and local play strategies reportedly influenced planning and expenditure in these departments. Pathfinders also reported engaging a wide range of external stakeholders in the design and delivery of play provision. These include Primary Care Trusts, schools and colleges, voluntary and community sector organisations, and registered social landlords.

In Play Pathfinders, that new adventure play sites are staffed and appropriately supervised by play workers

61. None of the adventure playgrounds had been built by the time the first and second waves of implementation case studies were carried out, so it was too early for most Pathfinders to discuss how they would operate in detail.

Local councils work to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play

62. Plans for the deployment of play workers varied between Pathfinders. A minority of sites will be regularly staffed, and only one Pathfinder planned to staff all of its sites regularly. A more common arrangement was either to staff all sites but not regularly, or to regularly staff a handful of sites. Only a minority of Pathfinders planned to involve volunteers in supervising play; but volunteering was more common in management and maintenance roles.

63. Most Pathfinders provided training for play staff. A wide range of formal and informal activities were offered including playwork qualifications. In addition, the implementation case studies suggest Pathfinders are improving the supply of professional play workers in their areas.

The approaches to long-term local impact monitoring and the value for money assessment

64. Chapter 5 presents the approaches to the long-term local impact monitoring and the value for money assessment in order to address the fourth and fifth key objectives for the Play Pathfinder evaluation:

- To identify the best way of locally monitoring the impact of play opportunities on outcomes for children and young people on a longer-term basis, including a review of secondary data sources that can be drawn on to provide evidence on local authority play provision
- To enable comparisons to be made of the cost-benefit ratios of different types of spending on play facilities, which shall also provide evidence of the cost-benefit ratios achieved by spending on play compared to other types of spending for which cost-benefit ratios are available.

Long-term local impact monitoring

65. Our solution for locally monitoring the impact of play opportunities on outcomes for children and young people on a longer term basis is encapsulated in the Local Area Reviews (LARs). They have been developed for the purposes of this evaluation, but they can be continued relatively easily by the Department, the local authorities or other partners after the conclusion of this evaluation and the programme itself. The approach entails the use of publicly available sources that are expected to be published periodically on an ongoing basis, for which results are available at the local authority level.

66. A LAR will be produced as part of this evaluation for each of the 11 case study Pathfinder local authority areas. Each LAR comprises two sections: one providing contextual indicators and a second providing play-related outcome indicators. The general context section presents statistics on the demography, economy, deprivation, crime and safety, and education in each local authority. It is not anticipated that the Play Pathfinders programme will impact directly on these. The second section presents statistics on play participation, physical activity, health and wellbeing, and community involvement. These are all areas in which the programme could potentially have impact. The single most important source for this second section is the Ofsted Tellus Survey. The general approach for the LARs is that data are collected for the period before and after the investments, in order to identify any changes that may be attributable to the investments.

Value for money framework

67. Assessing value for money is about comparing the costs of a programme with the inputs, outputs, outcomes and final benefits it generates which are additional and would not have happened in the counterfactual scenario without the programme. Value for money can be described through cost effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis, both of which will be employed in the evaluation. Throughout, the analysis will be careful to use evidence about what would have happened in the counterfactual – collected from local authority views about what would have happened without funding and from analysis of primary survey data.

68. Cost effectiveness is measured through:

- Economy[2]: comparing costs with the inputs they purchased
- Efficiency: comparing outputs with the inputs used to achieve them. For example, cost per play area developed or improved
- Effectiveness: comparing outcomes and impact with the programme's objectives. For example, cost per measure of increased play.

69. Cost-benefit analysis involves comparing the cost of delivering the programme and bringing about improvements in play areas with the monetary value of benefits[3] - for example, the enjoyment and other benefits of increased play converted into a monetary value.

70. We will combine information collected from a variety of sources to generate the value for money ratios shown in the table below. As can be seen, there is no benchmark (that has been found at least) for several of the ratios against which to compare the

[2] Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness are the '3Es' set out in the National Audit Office framework for assessing value for money

[3] This is the approach promoted in the Treasury Green Book

value for money ratios achieved by the programme. This re-emphasises the innovativeness of the investment being made through this and the Play Builder programmes and the contribution that this evaluation is making to the wider understanding of public investments in play.

Table 2 Value for money ratios

Ratio-type	Ratio	Benchmark found, and source
Economy: Cost per input	It will be difficult to define inputs in a way that they can be consistently compared with cost, across the programme. However, we will describe the scale of spending on different elements of the programme, such as consultation, design, build etc.	None
Efficiency: Cost per output:	Cost per additional sites built or refurbished/improved	None
Effectiveness: Cost per outcome:	Cost per additional number of children attending and using the sites	None
	Cost per additional number of children visiting a play space at least once in the last seven days	None
	Cost per additional child spending at least 30 minutes playing outside in the seven days	None
	Cost per additional child spending at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things outside school in the last seven days	Cost per person increasing their exercise – DoH evaluation (~ £260 to £2,790[4])
	Cost per Quality Adjusted Life Year (inferred long-term outcome from increased exercise)	Cost per Quality Adjusted Life Year – NHS evaluations (~£50 to ~£70 thousand[5])
Cost-benefit analysis. Cost per valued benefit:	Cost per monetary value of enjoyment from increased play	Cost per valued benefit – A general decision rule is that where valued benefits exceed costs the investment is worthwhile (though where costs exceed valued benefits, views on the unvalued benefits can still justify investment). No benchmarks have been found in the area of play

Implications for local authorities

71. The baseline findings provide an agenda for change to which local authorities are responding. They show that good progress is being made towards the delivery of the Department's eight Play Pathfinder and Play Builders investment aims. They also suggest areas in which local authorities could fine-tune their approach in the final stages of delivery. The main implications for local authorities are summarised below.

[4] *Evaluation of the Local Exercise Action Pilots* (Department of Health 2007)

[5] Ibid ; *Promoting physical activity for children: Cost effectiveness analysis* (NICE 2008)

Investing in play

- longer lead-in times for play area development offer more options for site selection, design and development
- the Pathfinder investment is expected to have a significant impact on the shape of local play provision; given that they were carried out before this investment, local authorities should consider planning new needs analyses and play audits to take account of this change.

Involving children, families and communities

- raise aspirations and tackle negative attitudes towards outdoor natural play
- extend the involvement of children, families and communities beyond site selection and design in order to develop an enduring sense of local ownership
- strengthen the contribution of children in play planning and management decision-making processes.

Making play areas attractive

- promote the benefits of outdoor play in general and the newly developed play areas in particular
- cater for the play preferences of boys and girls of different ages and abilities
- promote the benefits of outdoor play for children to girls aged 11-13 and minority ethnic groups in particular
- ensure the needs of children with disabilities and their families are met
- establish sustainable arrangements for the maintenance of play areas developed with Pathfinder funding
- provide facilities such as seating and toilets, and encourage parents and families to meet and socialise around children's play.

Improving safety

- work with highways and parks departments to improve safety on routes to play areas
- ensure adequate visibility into and across play areas
- ensure sites encourage challenging play and managed risk-taking.

Linking play to wider strategic planning

- strengthen links between play services and Children's Trusts and Local Strategic Partnerships, in line with statutory guidance[6]

[6] *Children's Trusts: statutory guidance on inter-agency cooperation to improve wellbeing of children, young people and their families* (DCSF 2008), *para. 2.8; The Play Strategy* (DCSF/DCMS 2008), Chapter 7.

- develop play spaces that encourage physical activity.

Staffing adventure playgrounds

- develop plans for managing and operating adventure play sites, including staffing arrangements.

Developing the play workforce and volunteer schemes

- improve intelligence about the size, qualifications and training needs of the play workforce, and the contribution of volunteers to supporting local play
- build the capacity of the play workforce to enable more adventurous play.

1. Introduction

1.1 SQW Consulting and Ipsos MORI are pleased to present this report of the evaluation of the Play Pathfinders programme to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (the Department). This document forms an interim report in the second year of the three year evaluation. It provides a summary of findings to date from the Play Pathfinder evaluation. At this stage of the evaluation, there are no findings on the impact that has been achieved by the programme. Rather, one of the key purposes of this report is to set out the baseline position in the Play Pathfinder areas against which the impact of the programme will be measured by the end of the evaluation in 2011.

Background to the Play Pathfinders programme

1.2 Play is an important way in which children enjoy their leisure time in childhood, and children and parents consistently call for better play provision locally. Play has been demonstrated by research to have clear benefits for the physical and social development of children. It also has broader community and societal benefits, enabling groups of all ages to come together in public settings for a common good.

1.3 In December 2007, the Children's Plan announced the Government would spend £225 million (subsequently increased to £235 million) to support local authorities in the development of exciting public play areas and new adventure playgrounds/play parks. The investment will result in approximately 3,500 new or improved play spaces, and 30 new adventure playgrounds being delivered between 2008 and 2011. The £235 million is being distributed through two linked programmes: Play Pathfinders and Play Builders. There are 30 Play Pathfinder local authorities, which will each receive approximately £2.5 million to deliver new and improved play spaces in their local area, including an adventure playground or play park. All other local authorities will receive Play Builder funding of approximately £1.1 million capital to develop at least 20 public play areas.

1.4 Play Pathfinder local authorities will each receive around £2m capital and £500k revenue funding. Each Pathfinder local authority is required to develop a new, high quality, supervised adventure playground or park and to create or renew around 25 public play areas. Pathfinders are also expected to test a range of innovative ways to improve play opportunities and to create more child-friendly communities. A key aim will be to develop new local approaches to ensuring play is safe and accessible locally. Pathfinder local authorities will also be expected to explore and demonstrate practice on

improving local play offers that go beyond the physical sites of play areas and play grounds/parks.

1.5 The key aims for the overall investment programme – that is, both Play Pathfinders and Play Builders – are set out below.

- To ensure investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits, focusing improvements and new facilities on the most needy areas and children.
- As part of this, making the close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space a core part of the delivery process. Local authorities and locally elected members should support the close engagement of local communities in the delivery of play strategies locally as part of their community empowerment agenda. Local authorities are also required to support and consider bids from third sector and community groups who might want to deliver projects.
- To ensure play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high-quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally. This should enable more challenging and active play opportunities that provide managed risks for children. Also, given the known physical and emotional benefits of play in natural environments, plans should explore sustainable development of play areas using natural materials
- Play areas that are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children
- That play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally. This means thinking about how to tackle bullying and crime in play areas and other public spaces, and road safety possibilities. The Department would like issues around supervision of play to be considered, including by detached play workers, other public sector staff in public space, and by volunteers. Alongside these considerations, the Department wants to explore ways to protect sites from vandalism and misuse.
- Local authorities will be expected to develop and embed top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning. The Department wants the investment to catalyse closer working across authority between children's services, planners and developers, highways officers and other professionals who shape, manage and supervise public space so that more child friendly communities can be created, ending the 'no ball games' culture. *Embedding the Play Strategy* (DCSF & DCMS 2010) anticipates that

> *… generally the Director of Children's Services would take the lead in overseeing the development of a top-tier play strategy and identify an appropriately senior and qualified officer to drive its development and implementation, liaising with other key departments to ensure support for the process.(ibid, p.41)*

- To use funding streams other than the play investment to improve play facilities on school sites, and explore how to make them more widely available outside of school hours to local communities. The Department also wants to explore how play strategies locally can be aligned with other key programmes such as children's centre and youth centre roll-out.
- In Pathfinder local authorities, ensuring new adventure play sites are staffed and appropriately supervised by play workers, who can act as an effective gateway to wider support services and positive activities.
- Councils will also have the opportunity to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce through centrally funded training opportunities, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play.

Background to the evaluation

1.6 The Department commissioned the current evaluation of the Government's programme of investment in play to establish the effects of the programme on children and young people, families and local communities and to provide cost-benefit information to assess value for money. This is a three-year evaluation that commenced in July 2008 and will complete in March 2011.

Aims and objectives

1.7 The overall aim of the evaluation is to evaluate the effects of the Government's £235 million investment programme in public play areas and new adventure playgrounds on children and young people, families and the wider community.

1.8 The evaluation will address the following five key objectives:

- To provide evidence on outputs and outcomes for children and young people, and their families that have resulted from the investment in play provision
- To provide evidence on outputs and outcomes for the wider community and local area that have resulted from the investment in play provision

- To provide information on how the investment programme is being implemented by local authorities and examples of good practice in the provision of play spaces to inform further development of play policy and spending plans by local authorities and government
- To identify the best way of locally monitoring the impact of play opportunities on outcomes for children and young people on a longer-term basis, including a review of secondary data sources that can be drawn on to provide evidence on local authority play provision
- To enable comparisons to be made of the cost-benefit ratios of different types of spending on play facilities, which shall also provide evidence of the cost-benefit ratios achieved by spending on play compared to other types of spending for which cost-benefit ratios are available.

Methodology

1.9 The five main elements of the methodology for the Play Pathfinders evaluation are as follows:

- A scoping phase, including:
  - consultation with the Department to develop a detailed understanding of key issues and to develop the evaluation approach in detail
  - a literature review to summarise existing evidence on the benefits of play provision, the types of play that promote positive outcomes for children and the roles of adults in supporting and supervising outdoor play
  - early research in seven play areas which had been improved recently (although not by the Play Pathfinder programme) in order to provide some indications of the likely impacts of the initiatives to be funded by Play Pathfinder, as well as to help inform and shape Play Pathfinder planning and investment
  - development of the research tools
- Impact case studies, to draw together data that, together with the local area reviews (see below), will allow the measurement of programme outputs and outcomes, including:
  - a longitudinal survey of children and their parents collecting general usage data and wider outcome measures linked to the health and well-being policy agenda (based on an in-home, face-to-face survey of children and their parents in 2009 and a telephone survey in 2010 following up the original sample of respondents)

- play area observations, collecting detailed usage data on the number and profile of users and the nature of usage, with baseline (pre-investment) data collected in 2009 and post-investment data collected in 2010
- play area audits, collecting data about the key features of play sites, such as what they contain and their physical upkeep and maintenance, with baseline (pre-investment) data collected in 2009 and post-investment data collected in 2010
- qualitative, depth research with children and their parents in 2010 to collect detailed information on users' experiences of the play provision and their perceptions on the impact of improvements to play areas (although the precise scope and purpose is subject to variation)

- Implementation case studies, comprising three waves (autumn 2008, summer 2009 and summer 2010) of interviews with local authority staff involved in the strategic development and delivery of play facilities. The purpose of these case studies is to assess the way in which the aims of the programme are being delivered and to provide information on good practice.
- Local area reviews, comprising a review of local level secondary data from administrative sources and existing surveys for each of the 11 Play Pathfinder case study areas. The data will set out the contextual conditions in each case study area and inform our understanding of the impacts and the effectiveness of implementation. The data will be updated in 2010 to track changes in outputs and outcomes across the evaluation period.
- A cost-benefit analysis, in order to analyse the overall costs and benefits of the Play Pathfinder programme, which will be based on data collated through the impact surveys, observations and local level indicators collected through the local area reviews.

1.10 The components of the Play Pathfinders evaluation are focused on 11 "case study" Pathfinder areas out of the 20 Pathfinders that received funding in 2008/09. The original intention was to focus on 15 Pathfinders, but only 11 were able to identify (in time for the start of the fieldwork due to local issues including planning consent, local opposition, site leases and ownership etc) sites that would be developed during 2009/10 where groundworks were scheduled to start after the conclusion of the fieldwork. (These two conditions were essential to enable the wave 1 fieldwork to capture a baseline position.) In response to this reduction in the number of case study Pathfinders, seven

other Wave 1 Pathfinder areas were selected to participate in a 'light touch' fashion in the implementation case studies.

1.11 The case study local authorities were selected with the intention to achieve a representative mix of local authority types (size, geography, deprivation etc) and proposed approaches to implementation. The current position of each local authority in relation to play infrastructure and investment was also considered in recognition that local authorities may be coming from different starting points. The Pathfinder local authorities participating in the evaluation are identified in Table 1-1 below.

Table 1-1 Pathfinder local authorities participating in the Play Pathfinder Evaluation

Case study Pathfinder local authorities	Pathfinders with 'light touch' participation
Bristol	Bath and North East Somerset
Camden	Cambridgeshire
Dudley	East Riding of Yorkshire
East Sussex	Nottingham City
Enfield	Rochdale
Kensington and Chelsea	Tower Hamlets
Knowsley	Wolverhampton
North Tyneside	
Portsmouth	
Rotherham	
Sunderland	

1.12 The decision to focus the evaluation on 15 (now 11) Pathfinder areas was a compromise between the competing desires to generate programme-level findings (incorporating the broad range of the Pathfinders, their contexts and implementation practices) and reporting on impacts in individual local authorities. On the one hand, focusing on 15 (now 11) case study Pathfinders, as opposed to any fewer, allows for stronger generalisations about the wider programme and will generate more robust and detailed analysis. On the other hand, spreading the evaluation resources in this way reduces the ability to report on impacts in individual local authorities. The effect of the compromise is that evidence from the case study local authorities will be combined to form one large sample so that most analysis is at the aggregate level. Where possible, sub-sample analysis will be performed to seek to identify which groups of young people have seen most change and

which types of play areas are associated with greatest changes in outputs and outcomes.

Progress

1.13 The scoping phase was completed in May 2009, with the development of the final versions of the research tools for the impact case study fieldwork and the final evaluation framework. The key outputs from this phase were:

- Research report on child and parent experiences of recently improved play areas (December 2008)
- Literature review (March 2009)
- The evaluation framework (May 2009)

1.14 The fieldwork for wave 1 of the impact case studies was carried out between May and September 2009. It included 72 play areas located in the 11 case study Pathfinder areas. The survey was conducted in-home, face-to-face among children aged eight to 13 and their parents, who were sampled from children in maintained schools from the National Pupil Database. A total of 2385 children aged 8 to 13 and 2469 parents were interviewed from Play Pathfinder areas, including 499 children and 522 parents interviewed with regards to an adventure playground/park.[7] In addition, a total of 72 audits and 838 observation sessions were carried out for the baseline analysis. The baseline findings were reported in draft in January 2010.

1.15 The implementation case studies commenced in October 2008 with the first wave of consultations with key staff in 15 Play Pathfinder local authorities. The purpose was to gather contextual information that will inform wider fieldwork, and to identify any early lessons or challenges arising from the first few months of the Pathfinder programme. These early findings were reported in November 2008.

1.16 The second wave of implementation case studies was carried out in July 2009, which was reported in August 2009. This wave included 18 of the 20 Wave 1 Pathfinder local authorities, including nine local authorities that were consulted in the first wave and two further local authorities that together make up the 11 case study areas for the evaluation. In addition, a further seven Pathfinders participated in a 'light touch' way.

[7] The numbers of interviews used for the analysis were 2191 children aged eight to 13 and 2268 parents, including 498 children and 521 parents with regards to an adventure playground/park. The main reason for the reduction in the number of interviews was that the local authority had decided not to continue with the (re)development of play area local to the interviewees after the start of the fieldwork. The reduction in the interviews relating to the adventure playgrounds/parks was because two interviews were carried out after the fieldwork had completed and were therefore not eligible.

1.17 A set of baseline local area reviews for each of the 11 case study Pathfinder areas was compiled in June 2009 using secondary data sources. Each local area review consists of contextual indicators (e.g. number of 8-13 year old children, rank of multiple deprivation, and perceived prevalence of anti-social behaviour) and indicators for play-related outputs and outcomes (e.g. proportion of children who have been to a play ground/park in the past four weeks, proportion of Year 6 children who are obese, and proportion of children who have been bullied). Most of the indicators in the latter section were sourced from the Ofsted Tellus Survey.

1.18 A draft approach to assessing value for money has been devised (latest version dated June 2009) in consultation with the Department and Play England. It includes a 'top-down' approach for assessing value for money for the programme as a whole and a 'bottom-up' approach for assessing value for money for the case study areas only (for which more data are available). The approach is heavily reliant on the collection of input (cost) data by Play England.

Play Builder Review

1.19 The Department also commissioned SQW Consulting and Ipsos MORI to conduct a smaller scale review of the Play Builder programme. This review has three components, which mirror aspects of the Play Pathfinder evaluation:

- 'Light touch' implementation case studies with ten Play Builder local authorities
- A longitudinal survey of around 1,000 children aged 8-13 and their parents
- A limited cost-benefit analysis for Play Builder case study areas, reflecting the fact that less data will be collected on Play Builders during the course of the evaluation

1.20 The findings to date from the Play Builder Review are not reported here. Instead, three separate reports are scheduled for the Play Builder Review over the duration of the review:

- Baseline findings from the longitudinal survey of children and parents (draft completed January 2010)
- An implementation case study report (expected February 2010)
- The Play Builder Review (expected March 2011)

Structure of this report

1.21 The purpose of this interim evaluation report is to provide a summary of findings to date from the Play Pathfinder evaluation. The report will achieve this, first, by summarising the scoping phase outputs and, then, by presenting the findings currently available for the five key evaluation objectives. The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter two presents the key outputs from the scoping phase: namely, a summary of the literature review and the evaluation framework
- Chapter three addresses the first and second objectives by summarising key findings from the baseline impact case studies and the baseline local area reviews
- Chapter four addresses the third objective by presenting the key findings from the implementation case studies
- Chapter five addresses the fourth and fifth objectives by summarising the approach to the local area reviews and the value for money assessment
- Chapter six concludes the report by presenting implications of the findings to date for local authorities and the next steps for the evaluation.

2. Key findings from the scoping phase

Introduction

2.1 The scoping phase began in July 2008 with the start of the evaluation and was completed in May 2009 with the development of the research tools and the evaluation framework. The key outputs from the scoping phase were the literature review (which was subsequently topped up), the early research into the likely impacts of improving play spaces and the evaluation framework. Summarised versions of these are presented below.

Literature review

Introduction

2.2 Academics from the Institute of Education and Roehampton University were appointed by the evaluation team to review the literature on play, identifying the benefits of play and how these can most appropriately be measured and evaluated. The review intentionally built upon a recent and comprehensive review of play, policy and practice conducted by Lester and Russell (2008) for Play England. It focused on evidence–based academic research in the UK and international literature specifically on:

- play provision for children aged 8 to 13 (the target age group for the Government's investment in play) and what 'works best' for this age-group
- outdoor play provision
- outcomes associated with outdoor play and how they are measured
- adult roles in supporting and supervising outdoor play.

2.3 A number of limitations with the literature on play were identified in the course of undertaking the review:

- First, searches for evidence confirmed the view of Lester and Russell (2008) that there is a dearth of academic peer-reviewed, evidence-based research on play provision and play work. In addition, evidence on the target age group of 8 to 13 is scarce, as the available evidence tends to focus on younger children.
- Second, we were unable to find research studies which specifically measure outcomes associated with either the benefits of outdoor play for children aged 8 to 13 or evidence on the most beneficial type of

outdoor play provision for this age group. Again, this may in part be due to the paucity of research on play in middle childhood. It is also because of the inherent difficulties in measuring the outcomes of play – a key point acknowledged by a number of commentators (see for example Ball, 2002; Lester and Russell, 2008).

- Third, little research was found on the nature of adult involvement in the play of the target age group (children aged 8 to 13).

2.4 Nevertheless, the literature review (supplemented by subsequent search and review findings) revealed important evidence which supports the rationale for public investment in play areas presented in the *Play Strategy* (DCSF/DCMS, 2008). It is clear that outdoor play benefits children, families and communities, but that opportunities for outdoor play are uneven and declining in some areas, and that significant barriers to outdoor play do exist. It is also clear that improving access to high-quality local play spaces encourages parents to allow their children out to play more, and offers an attractive alternative to sedentary options for children. Increasing access to high-quality play spaces by children, parents/carers and the wider community will challenge irrational fears about child safety and anti-social behaviour in play areas and parks. It follows that investment in high-quality play spaces can deliver benefits for children, families and communities, particularly for those with limited access to such spaces.

Findings

An overview of the play literature

2.5 Drawing on well-established literature, play is defined in the *Play Strategy* (DCSF/DCMS,2008) as:

> *… what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way for their own reasons balancing fun with a sense of respect for themselves and others. [DCSF/DCMS,2008:[8]]*

2.6 This definition reflects a consensus in the established literature that play is intrinsically motivated and voluntary, and that a balance needs to be struck between the interests of the children and those of the adults around them.

2.7 The literature on play can be categorised broadly into two types:

- literature on outcomes, which report on the measurable effects of different play activities

[8] *Children's Trusts: statutory guidance on inter-agency cooperation to improve wellbeing of children, young people and their families* (DCSF 2008)*, para. 2.8; The Play Strategy* (DCSF/DCMS 2008), Chapter 7.

- literature on the experiences afforded by play, which investigates what play is and what it means in children's lives.

2.8 Research on play outcomes tends to use quantifiable methods to measure effects at the level of the individual child and it tends to focus on 'effects' which can be measured quantifiably, in a reliable and valid way. Consequently, many studies on the effects of play look at the physical effects, as measured by physical tests, for example tests of heart rates, motor fitness, and so on. Other possible effects of play are often more difficult to measure, especially when they concern effects on social behaviour and well-being.

2.9 A systematic review of literature on children's physical activity[9] found poor quality and unsafe playgrounds were a barrier to children participating in unstructured outdoor physical activity, particularly in densely populated urban areas, among girls and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. Children and parents/carers often cite better local parks and safer play areas when asked what would increase children's physical activity. Physical activity is important in preventing and managing health conditions and disease.[10] The economic costs of *not* addressing mental health and obesity have been monetised by the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning:[11]

> *There is considerable evidence that the public economic costs of depression to the UK economy are much higher than is commonly believed. A conservative estimate was made in 1993 that the cost was £3 billion per annum, based on NHS costs and the cost of lost working hours. The cost of mental ill health overall has been estimated to be 11 times this figure. A similar study for obesity established a conservative public cost of £2.6 billion.*

2.10 Other benefits of improving outdoor play areas may be quantified in a similar way, for example the impact on community cohesion and satisfaction with local areas (National Indicators 1-6). The Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG)[12] has estimated potential economic benefits which could accrue from pursuing policies that improve cohesion, to which improvements in local play areas arguably contribute. Based on estimates of potential cost savings for different types of crime from an increase in community cohesion, CLG estimates total potential savings of £500,000 from a one unit increase in sense of community resulting from a 2-4% reduction in crime.

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[9] 'Children and physical activity: a systematic review of barriers and facilitators' (EPPI-Centre Report, Institute of Education, April 2003)

[10] 'Promoting physical activity and children: review 8 – active play', NICE Public Health Collaborating Centre (May 2008).

[11] Feinstein, L. 'Quantitative Estimates of the Social Benefits of Learning, 2: Health (Depression and Obesity)', Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No. 6 (October 2002)

[12] 'The economic case for cohesion' (CLG, August 2009)

2.11 The view that play can be studied in terms of such measureable outcomes may be challenged for upholding a narrow and instrumental view of play, as something which is 'useful for the future', rather than something which children engage in for its own sake, and which may often challenge adult norms of behaviour. Yet the literature on play outcomes is suggestive of the positive value of play and therefore plays an important role in play advocacy, and in policy formulation.

2.12 A number of the studies included in the review endeavoured to look beyond the physical effects of play, for example, children's adjustment to stressful situations. However, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate whether there is a causal relationship between play and these types of outcomes. For this reason, findings tend to state that play 'can help with' various social phenomena. The predictive value of such research is low, not because of problems with the research design, but because of the contextual, elusive and fluid nature of play. It is partly in response to these problems of measuring outcomes that there has been increased emphasis on participative methods, in which children and young people fully participate in evaluating play opportunities.

Distinguishing play among 8 to 13 year olds

2.13 Middle childhood occupies a highly significant phase in human life at a time in which we might expect to see some profound changes in the ways that children play. For example, within the 8 to 13 age group, children are subject to a number of important transitions: educational (changing schools), social (becoming independent) and biological (adolescence). In addition, children spend less time under the supervision of their parents (which contributes to increasing their physical activity levels - see below), come increasingly under the influence of other adults and spend more time with peers away from their parents. All of these factors are likely both to impact upon and shape the ways in which children in middle childhood play.

2.14 There is a relatively small body of literature on play in middle childhood and outdoor play in particular. However, the studies consulted suggest that the play of children in middle childhood share many characteristics of play seen in younger children. For example, it is experimental, exploratory, undertaken for its own sake, spontaneous, and includes self-imposed goals (rather than external goals), risk-taking and active engagement (cognitive and/or physical). The following are specific characteristics of play observed in children aged 8 to 13 vis-à-vis younger children:

- Differently organised in the form of games and team activities requiring consistent, complex rules planned and played out over longer time periods
- Increased desire to 'hang out' with friends away from the gaze of adults, particularly in early adolescence
- Increased 'play-fighting', particularly among male children, which serves an inherently social function in groups.

Outcomes associated with play

2.15 There is a substantial empirical and theoretical research literature to support the view that play *per se* is a highly significant activity in human experience and development. However, play, by its very nature, is notoriously difficult to reduce to measurable outcomes and benefits. Below we summarise our review of the literature concerning the benefits of play and the link between play, physical activity and health benefits.

The benefits of play

2.16 Play can be viewed on many levels in terms of its outward signs and apparent demands on social, emotional and cognitive functioning. It is well-documented that humans share many of the so-called 'lower functions' of play animals, but there are a number of highly significant ways in which human play departs from this kind of play: most notably the development of imagination and with it a 'theory of mind' seen in the early pretend play of toddlers and the complex social pretence that characterises the play of children aged 3-5. The ability to play in this way is unique to humans and lays the foundations for crucial life skills, such as empathy, problem solving, creativity and innovation.

2.17 There is general consensus that play contributes to the well-being and health of children in different ways. Key benefits arising from play include the following:

- Happiness – plenty of time for play in childhood is linked to happiness in adulthood
- Physical activity – active play facilitates children's development of spatial abilities and an understanding of the world through the senses and movement
- Cognitive skills – there is a close link between play and cognitive development
- Social and emotional learning – make-believe play is related to better overall emotional health and social functioning.

Play, physical activity and health

2.18 There is strong evidence that physical activity acts as a natural preventative to childhood obesity and promotes good physical and mental health. This has led to the call to ensure that children have regular time to play, with physical education at school and outdoor play outside school viewed as fundamental requirements for healthy child development. In addition, a review by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) found that there is a moderate-to-strong positive association between time spent outside and physical activity in children and young people. This would suggest that the increased provision of outdoor play spaces will increase physical activity, which in turn will derive health benefits for children.

2.19 We know that obesity in children is increasing. Between 1995 and 2003, the percentage of children aged 2 to 10 who were overweight (including those who were obese) rose from 22.7% to 27.7%, with the largest increases found amongst older children within this range (8-10) and those living in deprived inner city areas and/or in low income households.[13] These are the areas where parents and children report inadequate facilities for outdoor play.[14] Research by Roger Mackett and colleagues[15] has shown that play is a major contributor to children's physical activity, and that children are more active – and consume more calories per minute – when playing outside than when participating in structured outdoor activities (or, indeed, playing at home). Moreover, children also tend to walk when they go out to play but travel by car to structured activities, and they are more physically active when they go out to play without an adult. The research team have also shown that

> *… the areas where children spent much time playing, walking around, being without adults, and being active are the neighbourhoods with typical comfortable suburban settings, good accessibility to local shops, or strong social support networks. On*

[13] Jotangia D, Moody A, Stamatakis E, Wardle H, Obesity among children under 11 (NatCen and University College London for Department of Health, April 2005).

[14] Local government actions to prevent childhood obesity (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies, Washington 2009).

[15] Mackett R, 'Promoting active play and tackling obesity', paper presented at the Play Matters annual conference (London 2004); Mackett R, Brown B, gong Y, Ktazawa K, Paskins J, 'Children's independent movement in the local environment', *Built Environment*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2004), pp. 454-468; Mackett R, Banister D, Batty M, Einon D, Brown B, Gong Y, Kitazawa K, Marshall S, Paskins J, 'Final report on "Children's Activities, Perceptions And Behaviour in the Local Environment (CAPABLE)" (University College London, April 2007); Brown B, Mackett R, Gong Y, Kitazawa K, Paskins J, 'Gender differences in children's pathways to independent mobility', *Gender Geographies*, vol. 6, no. 4 (November 2008), pp. 385-401; Mackett R, Paskins J, 'Children's physical activity: the contribution of playing and walking', *Children and Society*, vol. 22 (2008), pp. 345-357.

the other hand children tend to be driven through more deprived areas.[16]

2.20 Observed patterns of children outdoors suggests that 'provision of a local open space may well increase children's levels of physical activity by allowing more children to go out alone, and so go out more often'.[17] These findings[18] emphasise the importance to children's physical health of providing accessible local public spaces where they can play freely, actively, independently, and safely. .

'What works' – types of outdoor play provision

2.21 One of the tasks of the literature review was to explore the types of outdoor play provision that are associated with positive benefits. However, aside from the benefits of unstructured play outlined above, establishing exactly which types of play are most beneficial in promoting health and well-being is difficult to ascertain from the available literature.

Types of play space and provision

2.22 Conventional playgrounds, often consisting of structured, pre-fabricated components, are criticised frequently in the literature. The view is held widely that they are designed to control children through spatial segregation, whereas children, it is argued, prefer informal spaces, where they are not isolated from family, friends and neighbours. They tend also to cater to the needs of boys rather than girls and do not enable children with disabilities to play.

2.23 Adventure playgrounds differ fundamentally from conventional playgrounds, consisting of more open-ended elements – or 'loose parts' – including stones, wood, water and so on. They vary in their design, but generally allow play with various materials, engagement in handicraft activities as well as, in some cases, animal husbandry and gardening. Evidence from a Europe-wide survey indicates that they cultivate sensorial perception and enjoyment, support explorative and experimental impulses and contribute to social contacts in neighbourhoods.

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[16] Mackett, Banister, et. al (2007) op cit.

[17] Mackett, Brown et. al (2004) op cit.

[18] Supported by other studies: Kaczynski A T, Henderson K A, 'Parks and recreation settings and active living: a review of associations with physical activity functions and intensity', *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, vol. 5 no 4 (2008), pp. 619-632; and Must A, Tybor D J, 'Physical activity and sedentary behaviour: a review of longitudinal studies of weight and adiposity in youth', *International Journal of Obesity*, vol. 29, Supplement 2 (September 2005), pp. S89-S96.

2.24 There is some evidence that play in natural settings or with natural elements in the play environment is particularly beneficial to children's well-being, resulting in enhanced ability to concentrate and increased resilience to stress and adversity. Also children who play in a natural environment outdoors have been found to have significantly better motor fitness than their peers who play in conventional playgrounds. However, when asked what would entice them to use play parks more, children also identify facilities and equipment, including basket ball rings, skate ramps and somewhere to sit and shelter. It is apparent, therefore, that the design of play spaces needs to take into account children's age-specific needs and interests, and to involve them at every stage of planning, implementation and maintenance. Opening their eyes to new possibilities for outdoor play beyond their current experience is an important part of such engagement.

Changing patterns of play and obstacles to play

2.25 A number of studies express concern about the observed changing patterns of play over time with children spending less time outdoors, with less unsupervised play time and fewer playmates from less diverse backgrounds. This change is partly as a result of (perceived) fears about children's safety – in decisions taken by parents, schools and designers of play provision. In a recent opinion poll conducted by Play England,[19] half of the surveyed parents (particularly those on low incomes) reported that there were not enough places where they live for children to play safely without an adult. It confirms other evidence supporting the rationale for *The Play Strategy*[20] which shows that opportunities for outdoor play are decreasing, whilst fear of unsupervised outdoor play is increasing and the variable quality of play areas is discouraging parents from letting their children play out. Access to high quality play areas is thus an important facilitator of outdoor play. Several studies have shown that children's participation in physical activity is positively associated with access to free recreational facilities, alongside good transport infrastructure and local conditions (low levels of crime and deprivation).[21]

2.26 Many researchers focus on the obstacles to children participating in free, self-expressive play. A common theme is that safety measures and standards are being put before children's interests, development and health. The over-design of playgrounds is said to restrict discovery and experimentation, thus enhancing the lack of freedom children experience in their play and general

[19] 'Play 2009 opinion poll summary' (Play England, July 2009).

[20] 'The Play Strategy: evidence summary' (DCSF, December 2008).

[21] Davison K K, Lawson C T, 'Do attributes in the physical environment influence children's physical activity? A review of the literature', *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity*, vol. 3 no. 19 (2006).

recreation. Obstacles to free self-expressive play identified include: judging play outside of education to be less important for learning and development; not taking account of free play when planning play spaces; and parents being unaware of the benefits of play or how to access stimulating play spaces and experiences.

Adult roles in supporting and supervising play

2.27 There is much debate about the nature and benefits of adult involvement in children's play. This is particularly the case in educational settings where play has been viewed by adults in instrumental terms, as a vehicle for delivering the prescribed curriculum and for learning 'real world' things. Adults need to recognise the different ways in which children play, which includes play which is 'not nice' from an adult perspective, but which may be of interest and value to the children. Play fighting is one such example, which may present a challenge for some adults. The seemingly chaotic and anarchic qualities of play may be disconcerting and cause adults to feel a loss of control, yet it is precisely these features – flexibility, unpredictability, spontaneity and imagination – that for many define the very nature of play. There is a fine balance to be struck between adult involvement in enabling positive play experiences and adding 'play value' and involvement that restricts or interferes with children's free and self-expressive play.

2.28 The prevailing view in the literature is that the most important influence on how children play is the attitude of adults towards children and the play that they choose. Differences between adult and child attitudes to play may exist in situations where adults are in supervisory roles, particularly with regard to health and safety, risk-taking and challenging types of play. One study of after-school provision carried out by Barnardo's found that good play opportunities often relied on a highly motivated and energetic supervisor with a background in play work. When no such personality was available, after school clubs tended to be more about 'crowd control' than stimulating play opportunities. The authors conclude that training is essential if adults are to understand the best ways to support children's own self-initiated activity and encourage risk-taking in a safe environment.

2.29 'Playworker' is the term used to describe people, whether paid or voluntary, who work within services which aim to provide for children's play. The nature of the playworker role is described as 'low intervention, high response' allowing children to engage in free play activity in a safe and stimulating environment. In many ways, the introduction of play rangers into the play workforce reinstates the use of 'loose parts' in play, an idea which has gained considerable currency.

2.30 In a recent report on the impact of staffed play provision,[22] Demos argue that staffed play provision can make a significant difference to children, parents and neighbourhoods by extending and diversifying play opportunities, 'unlocking the potential of public spaces and giving children and parents the confidence to use them'. Demos was unable to quantify the impact of staffed play provision, claiming that the effects of such provision are 'potential' rather than 'predictable.' However, in a recent study, Matrix Knowledge[23] has estimated the economic value of staffed after-school clubs and adventure playgrounds by comparing the costs of this provision with health and educational benefits over a long (20-year) period. With regard to monetising the contribution staffed adventure playgrounds make to children's physical activity, Matrix associated increased physical activity in childhood with higher levels of physical activity and decreased chances of experiencing a range of diseases in adulthood, and then calculated the monetary benefit of reduced incidence of these diseases in terms of healthcare cost savings and increased quality-adjusted life years. With regard to monetising the contribution staffed adventure playgrounds make to social play, Matrix associated social play with Key Stage 1 attainment as a predictor of later attainment at GCSE, and then calculated the monetary benefit of improved GCSE performance in terms of increased adult earnings. By these measures, it has been estimated that the 'total present value of the benefits derived from an adventure playground' (compared with no playground) is £2.80 million.

2.31 Findings such as these will be controversial for many who have contributed to the literature of children's play. For example, in their extensive review of literature on play policy and practice, Lester and Russell[24] conclude that

> *… we can see how play can make a significant contribution in broad principled terms to the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda…. However, this will not be through a linear cause-effect relationship, and the 'outcomes' of playing cannot be externally determined and measured. Indeed attempts to do so will inevitably frustrate the very qualities inherent in children's play.*

They caution that the lesson for policy makers is that improving children's environments and making them more 'playable' may well produce significant health and well-being outcomes, but 'an understanding of how play contributes to these outcomes needs to be grounded in the key messages from the research':

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[22] 'People Make Play: the impact of staffed play provision on children, families and communities', (Demos for Play England, 2010)

[23] 'An economic valuation of play provision: final report' (Matrix Knowledge for Play England, September 2010)

[24] Lester L, Russell W, Play for change. Play, policy and practice: a review of contemporary perspectives (Play England, September 2008)

That is, that the characteristics of playing (for example control, uncertainty, flexibility, novelty, routine, adaptiveness, non-productivity) are what give rise to pleasure and therefore further motivation to play, and in so doing help to shape and develop links between the regions of the brain involved in emotion, motivation and reward systems, supporting the vertical integration of brain regions, and defining coordination between perceptual, motor and thinking systems. Such an understanding of play allows those responsible for creating places for play to move beyond a focus on the content of playing as an indication of skills to be rehearsed for future adult life, towards an understanding of a more fundamental and emotional purpose for play.

Early research into the likely impacts of improving play spaces

Introduction

2.32 Members of the evaluation team from Ipsos MORI were tasked with exploring the impact of recent investments and redevelopment work in seven case study play areas around England. These were not play areas that had been developed with Play Pathfinder or Play Builders funding. The aim of the research was to understand how the recent improvements had impacted on the perceptions and satisfaction of children and parents who used the play areas, and to identify key learning points to inform future investment initiatives – namely, the Play Pathfinders and Play Builders funding streams.

2.33 The seven case study areas were chosen in consultation with the Department and Play England and were selected primarily as useful models of play area redevelopment. One important distinction between the play areas was whether they were a 'community' or a 'destination' play area. A 'community' play area is one which serves a particular community, for instance a specific estate and most of the users are local to that area (i.e. live within walking distance). A 'destination' play area is one which, whether designed for this purpose or not, attracts a range of people from a wider area and may be seen as a day out. In their post-development form, the sample of seven play areas comprised four 'community' play areas and three 'destination' play areas.

2.34 The research involved three elements. First, telephone depth interviews were conducted with two members of staff at each local authority in which the play areas were located. These interviews provided contextual information about what the redevelopment work had entailed, and the authorities' aims in carrying out the work. Second, researchers then conducted an on-site 'audit' of the equipment and facilities at each of the seven play sites. Third, the researchers interviewed seven children and their parents per site face-to-face

in their homes. Children and parents living close to the play areas were selected, and all were screened to ensure they had used the play areas since the redevelopments.

Findings

Overall views and usage of play areas

2.35 In all seven areas parents and children were extremely positive about the recent changes to their play areas and felt them to be much improved.

2.36 Most local authorities reported higher user numbers and, in some cases, different types of users beginning to visit the sites since the redevelopments. For example, local authority staff in one area had noticed groups of disabled children starting to use the site, and another play area was beginning to attract visitors from neighbouring towns.

2.37 Children and parents also reported changes in the ways they used the sites. In many cases children were no more likely to visit than they were prior to the improvements – often there was a lack of alternative play space so even poor quality sites had been widely used – but felt they spent longer periods of time when they did visit, especially during the summer holidays, because they were unlikely to get bored.

2.38 Despite the fact that the seven play areas were very different, there were a few aspects which parents and children mentioned repeatedly as being central to their positive impressions of the improved play areas across all sites:

- The variety of equipment to use, and the inclusion of some universally popular pieces of equipment – such as basket swings, zip-wires and climbing frames – were important to the appeal of the areas for children. This helped to make play experiences more exciting and enjoyable than on other play areas, and meant that children liked to stay at the sites for longer periods of time than previously. Effective consultation with children and parents at the design stage was important here in ensuring that play sites had a strong appeal and were exciting for children to use.
- The fact that the sites catered for all age groups, from toddlers to teenagers was an important selling point for parents, because it meant they could take their whole family to the play area. Visiting with their parents and family was the most common way that children aged 8-13 went to play areas (this was particularly the case for children under 11 in community sites, and for children of all ages for destination sites).

This suggests that, for the Play Pathfinder and Play Builder schemes to improve play experiences for 8-13 year olds effectively, new play areas will need to cater for all age groups.

- The modern and exciting appearance of the redeveloped sites appealed to parents and children. In particular, wooden constructions were perceived as looking contemporary by parents and for children were associated with 'adventure play' as distinct from more traditional park equipment. Authorities stressed that considering the overall look and feel of areas, and making sure that the play areas were 'playable environments', was important in enhancing users' overall experiences.
- Where play sites were staffed, the supervision of these areas had a bigger impact on perceptions of safety than any other measure. While this is not vital – case study areas that were unstaffed were still perceived as safe – it meant that parents were more comfortable in letting their children go to sites unaccompanied and enhanced children's sense of safety.

Issues affecting usage and perceptions of play areas

2.39 The research confirmed the importance of many features of the case study play areas that have been highlighted in previous research (for example, on-site safety). However, within these factors, there were a number of specific issues which emerged as important in the current research (for example, the impact of teenagers in play sites on overall feelings of safety) as well as new aspects which users spontaneously mentioned as being very important. Key issues and the impact they have on users' perceptions and use of play areas are highlighted below.

Catering for all age groups

2.40 The fact that play areas catered for all age groups, from toddlers to teenagers, was mentioned spontaneously by nearly all parents as the best feature of the improved play areas. It meant that they could take their whole families to sites together. In fact, this was the most common way that children aged 8-13 visited play sites, and supporting family use of play sites appears to be vital in encouraging usage among this age group.

2.41 Many authorities have set up 'zoned' play areas which include toddler, teenager, and intermediate play zones, although most do not strictly impose age limits on using equipment and children can move freely across the zones. This has both positive and negative impacts as far as users are concerned. Parents value the fact they can take all their children, irrespective of age, to one play area. A few parents felt reassured by the presence of older children

on the sites, especially those whose children went to unsupervised parks unaccompanied. However, some children felt intimidated or frustrated when older children used 'their' equipment, particularly as teenagers were perceived to monopolise more popular activities. At the same time, children reported using the teenagers' play areas, liking the chance to stretch and challenge themselves. Successful play areas will need to cater for all ages, but will need to manage this carefully to ensure that younger users are not intimidated or frustrated by the presence of older children.

Safety

2.42 On-site safety is perceived as being fundamental by local authorities, parents and children. Authorities acknowledge that, unless children feel safe, they will not use a play area, so addressing safety issues was a prime concern when re/designing play areas. The most successful interventions in terms of design appear to be those which enhance the visibility of play sites – for example, ensuring that the play area is visible from nearby roads or houses, and that sites and pathways are designed to give parents a good overview of the whole park at once. Busy locations also help to enhance feelings of safety – for example, the fact that one park was used by adults as a short-cut route to the city centre helped to enhance feelings of safety. Other features such as CCTV and lighting of areas at night were not always perceived by parents or children as reassuring, often because they are sceptical about whether CCTV cameras are monitored or whether lighting merely encourages anti-social behaviour on the site at night. When re-developing new parks, it will be important to select locations carefully to ensure that there is adequate visibility into and across the site, and ensure that the design works to maximise visibility. This finding differs from the view of Play England that well designed play areas should balance safety concerns with children's desire for hidden play and ensure that such play takes place a short distance from plain view so that children are never far from safety.

2.43 The most successful method of increasing parents' feelings of safety is on-site supervision. Where play areas were staffed, this was mentioned by parents and children as the best aspect of the site, both for increasing feelings of safety and in terms of the extra play value they added. Parents of older children appeared to be more comfortable in allowing their children to visit these sites unaccompanied. Parents whose children used unsupervised play areas consistently mentioned that on-site play workers or supervisors would help to improve the site more than any other change. In these cases, an adult presence in case of accidents on-site was important, as was making sure that children played together fairly.

2.44 Local authorities' concerns about safety appear to focus on the sites themselves rather than travel routes to the sites. Parents in many areas expressed concerns about the road safety close to parks. This had a large impact on parents' willingness to let their children visit the sites unaccompanied; where children had to cross busy roads, and especially where easy-to-access pedestrian crossings were not provided, parents were not comfortable about their children visiting the parks independently. Therefore, it will be important for authorities working on future developments to consider travel routes and how to ensure safety on surrounding roads as well as on-site safety.

Play features and facilities

2.45 In all seven sites, local authorities aimed to offer a wide variety of play experiences for a range of age groups; they aimed to achieve this through the creation of a 'playable environment' as well as specific pieces of equipment. The variety and wide age-appeal of the play sites was also an important success factor from parents' and children's perspectives. The following aspects of the sites were mentioned consistently as important to a good play experience – in all cases these added to the appeal of the sites, captured and retained children's interest so that they wanted to use the sites for long periods of time:

- *Equipment that allows multiple users*. The most popular piece of equipment on several sites was the basket swing which allows several children to swing at once if pushed by other children. This allows children to both socialise and work together (which appealed to girls particularly) and allows a competitive element as children try to swing higher than each other (which appealed to boys and older children). Other equipment that allows several users – including zip-wires that allow two users and a set of swings where users' feet touch together – were also popular, especially among girls who liked the chance to socialise.
- *Scary or challenging equipment*. The sense of challenge or excitement often came from climbing equipment, high pieces of equipment (such as spinning T bars) and pieces which allowed children to travel quickly. These were seen as 'scary in a good way' and as allowing children to stretch themselves, progress and improve over time. The attraction of these pieces also lay in being able to use equipment that is inaccessible to younger users (because they lack the height, physical strength or confidence needed). However, children like to retain a sense of control when using this type of equipment. Users mentioned

that these pieces could be used 'again and again' as they did not tend to get bored with them.

- *Equipment that can be used in a variety of ways* was also popular, including role-playing equipment and dressing-up boxes. On one site the favourite piece of equipment was a climbing frame referred to variously as the 'rocket', 'missile' and 'alien', a climbing structure whose external walls each comprised different rock-climbing faces, and which had an internal climbing frame. Children liked the fact that they could climb up it in a variety of ways and 'would never get bored' of using it. The variety of names used for the equipment indicated how it had captured children's imaginations.
- *Equipment designed for ball games* and space to play football was very important to boys. Multi-game ball areas surrounded by a fence were popular for playing football and basketball, while boys liked to have open space on which to play football games. Often there was high demand for these areas and some users felt there was not enough open space available. Making sure there is lots of open space on future developments will be important in attracting boys in particular.
- *Indoor equipment and activities*, where provided, were very popular as they not only extended the range of activities on offer, but also offered opportunities for play in poor weather conditions, and therefore meant that play areas could be used all year round. Indoor areas typically contained activities such as pool tables and computer games. Children particularly enjoyed supervised indoor activities (where provided) such as cooking, woodwork and arts and crafts. At sites where indoor areas were not provided, several children and parents mentioned spontaneously that these would improve the play area.

2.46 In terms of other facilities, having toilets and cafés on or close to play areas was important to some children and nearly all parents. Having basic facilities was seen as enabling parents to spend longer periods of time at the parks more comfortably.

Catering for boys and girls

2.47 Gender differences emerged strongly in all play areas. Boys showed a strong preference for more physical activities and particularly playing football. Girls were often more likely to use equipment socially to chat with friends, particularly as they got older. Often the same pieces of equipment were popular with both girls and boys, but used in different ways – for example, basket swings were universally popular, but boys were more likely to highlight competitive aspects (such as trying to swing higher than others) while girls

highlighted social aspects (such as chatting to friends in the swing). Making sure that sites have a range of equipment to support both active play and socialising will be important; however, exploring ways to encourage girls to engage in more active play will also be important in realising the overall objectives of the Play Pathfinder and Play Builder initiatives.

Environment and maintenance

2.48 An important aim for many local authorities was to create a play area that complemented and sat within the existing natural environment. In many cases, they wanted to create 'playable' areas not just through the equipment, but also through use of natural features such as trees, logs and rocks. While some of these environmental aspects were not mentioned by users without prompting, having a natural-looking and pleasant environment was valued by parents and children; in several areas, for example, parents noted that they visited the play area for family picnics during the summertime. A natural-looking environment therefore helps to support family use of the areas. Parents also liked the use of wooden features in some play areas, which they felt looked modern and different to traditional playground equipment.

2.49 While parents and children had few complaints about the maintenance of equipment, waterlogging of entire sites was a serious concern in four of the seven play sites. This was a barrier to using the sites when the weather is unpleasant. Several parents mentioned that they would not let their children go to play sites which were very muddy, and in one site some parents complained the site would be unusable in winter months. Addressing any drainage problems on play sites and ensuring that surfacing is sufficient even in rainy/muddy conditions will be important in supporting usage in poor weather and in all seasons.

The role of the park within the local community

2.50 Encouraging the involvement of the local community in designing play areas was felt to be very important by all local authorities. This had been achieved in a variety of ways, from actively seeking the input of local residents and stakeholder groups, through to consulting on potential designs of play sites and taking children on visits to other play areas to assess pieces of equipment. In many cases, the play areas seemed to have generated and contributed to a stronger sense of community. For example, users were often likely to stress local community events held on the play sites as being especially enjoyable. Parents and children in many areas mentioned that socialising and meeting new friends was one of the main reasons for going to the play area.

Location

2.51 Location affects usage of play areas. As might be expected, those living in close proximity reported visiting the areas more frequently. This has a wider implication when it comes to the aims and usage of community sites as against destination sites. As families tend to make special visits to destination sites, parents tended to feel that a greater range and variety of activities needs to be on offer to justify the visits. Children tended to visit these sites for longer periods of time per visit. Community sites, on the other hand, were used more regularly, but sometimes for shorter periods of time (children visiting on the way home from school, for example). Although destination and community sites fulfil different roles, there was some evidence from a few of the children interviewed that they preferred to have a park closer to their home, even if it was of inferior quality, as they would get more opportunity to use it and (if older) there was more scope for them to visit alone.

Local authority suggested learning points

2.52 Although the research did not focus on the processes of improving parks, there were some broad points which local authorities felt had helped to ensure success in their projects. The most important of these was the involvement of the local community – as well as obvious stakeholder groups such as children, parents, and schools – in the design stage. Different forms of consultation were used across the sites, but all appear to have been successful in helping to create sites which genuinely appeal to local users and over which children and parents have a sense of pride and ownership.

2.53 Authorities also stressed the importance of taking time to find exactly the right pieces of equipment for the site and to develop the sites in stages, with continuous evaluation and assessment of what is working. A few local authorities had found this very helpful in capitalising upon some of the unintended consequences and uses of the equipment they had installed.

Evaluation framework

2.54 The evaluation framework was discussed at length with the Department during the scoping phase of the evaluation. The framework comprises a logic model and the outputs and outcomes that the Department wishes to measure through the evaluation. The scope and coverage of the outputs and outcomes were welcomed by members of the Evaluation Steering Group in January 2009 and they formed the basis for the research instruments designed for the different strands of the evaluation.

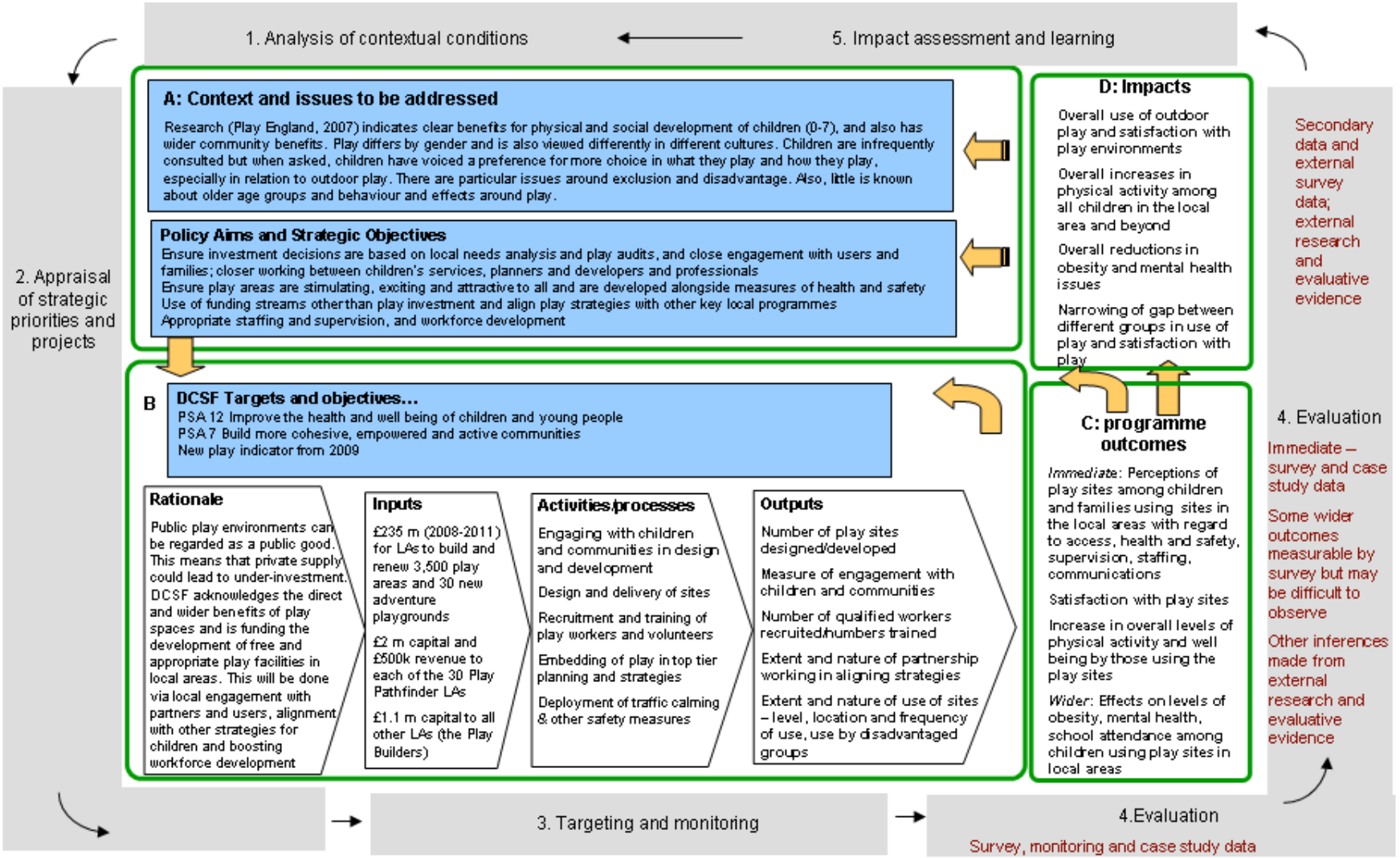
The logic model

2.55 We have used a 'logic chain' approach to inform our overall approach to assessing and evaluating the impact of the programme. A logic model provides a framework for describing the theory, assumptions and evidence underlying an intervention and 'links outcomes (both short and long term) with programme activities/processes and the theoretical assumptions/principles of the programme'[25]. It sets out the main causal linkages between the different stages of the programme's 'life cycle' from analysis of the contextual conditions to appraisal, programme delivery and the achievement of outputs, outcomes and impacts, which, it is hoped, will change the contextual conditions that prompted the intervention in the first place.

2.56 The logic model developed for this evaluation is shown in Figure 2-1.

[25] WK Kellogg Foundation (January 2004) Logic Model DevelopmentGuide

Figure 2-1 Logic model for the evaluation of the Play Pathfinders and Play Builders programmes



Programme outputs and outcomes

2.57 In total, the Department wishes to measure progress against 25 programme outputs and outcomes through the evaluation. These comprise ten outputs, eight immediate outcomes and seven wider outcomes. These outputs and outcomes are listed in the three tables below. Each table identifies the strands of the evaluation that are intended to provide evidence for each of the programme outputs and outcomes.

Table 2-1 Programme outputs

Outputs	Local area reviews	Implementation case studies	Audits of play spaces	Observations in play spaces	In-home survey with children and parents	Qualitative interviews with parents and children
(1) Increased supply of play facilities	X	X	X			
(2) Increase in quality of play spaces and facilities	X	X	X		X	X
(3) Improved access to a variety of play spaces (Play England guidance)	X	X	X	X		X
(4) Improved supply of play workers/professionalising the workforce	X	X	X		X	
(5) Improved maintenance of sites	X	X		X	X	X
(6) Integration of play into LA planning and policy	X	X				
(7) Improved road safety/less traffic in proximity of play spaces	X	X	X		X	X
(8) Involvement of children, families and community in design and delivery of play spaces		X			X	X
(9) Improved co-ordination with voluntary sector organisations to deliver supply	X	X				
(10) Involvement of voluntary sector in maintenance and running of play spaces		X				

Table 2-2 Immediate programme outcomes

Immediate outcomes	Local area reviews	Implementation case studies	Audits of play spaces	Observations in play spaces	In-home survey with children and parents	Qualitative interviews with parents and children
(11) Enhanced use of play spaces	X	X	X	X	X	X
(12) Enhanced satisfaction with play facilities and spaces	X				X	X
(13) Enhanced positive perceptions and attitudes towards outdoor play	X	X			X	X
(14) Enhanced feelings of safety in accessing play spaces			X	X	X	X
(15) Reduction in perceptions of bullying in and around play spaces					X	X
(16) Increase in participation of children in outdoor play	X			X	X	X
(17) Improved risk-taking skills in managed environments		X			X	X
(18) Greater involvement of children in the local community/children feeling they have a bigger stake in the community	X	X				

Table 2-3 Wider programme outcomes

Wider outcomes	Local area reviews	Implementation case studies	Audits of play spaces	Observations in play spaces	In-home survey with children and parents	Qualitative interviews with parents and children
(19) Reduction in criminal/anti-social behaviour in and around play spaces	X	X	X		X	X
(20) Increase in participation of children in physical exercise	X				X	X
(21) Increased participation in other types of physical activity	X				X	X
(22) Reduced levels of obesity	X		X			X
(23) Improved emotional health and well-being	X		X			X
(24) Increased community cohesion	X	X			X	X
(25) Enhanced social networks among families with children aged 8-13					X	

3. Key findings from the impact case studies and local area reviews

Introduction

3.1 This chapter addresses the first two key objectives for the Play Pathfinder evaluation:

- To provide evidence on outputs and outcomes for children and young people, and their families that have resulted from the investment in play provision
- To provide evidence on outputs and outcomes for the wider community and local area that have resulted from the investment in play provision.

3.2 It presents summary findings from the baseline impact case studies and the baseline local area reviews.

Baseline impact case studies

Introduction

3.3 In this section, we report the key findings from the baseline impact case studies, which were reported (in draft) in early January 2010.[26] They are based on fieldwork that was carried out between June and September 2009 at and in the vicinity of play sites in the 11 case study local authorities. No groundworks had started at any of the play sites when the fieldwork was carried out. However, in most cases, the site was an existing play area at the time of the fieldwork and so respondents were able to comment based on its current, pre-investment form. Respondents were also asked about the wider play provision locally and their participation in and views about play and other physical activity. A second wave of fieldwork will take place during 2010 after the play sites have been (re)developed. We will then measure the difference made by the Pathfinder investment by comparing the findings before and after the site was (re)developed.

3.4 The fieldwork comprised three elements. The largest element was an in-home quantitative survey, which was conducted with children and parents living in the catchment areas of Play Pathfinder local area sites (henceforth referred to as 'sited play areas'), Play Pathfinder adventure playground sites and Play Builder sites. (The results from the Play Builder sites are not reported here.) In the case of the Play Pathfinder sites, two additional components of data collection were undertaken: observation counts of visitors to play sites and audits mapping the features of the

[26] 'Evaluation of Play Pathfinders and Play Builders: Wave 1 baseline report' (Ipsos MORI for DCSF, Draft Report, 22 December 2009)

play sites. In total, 3,280 children aged 8 to 13 and 3,389 parents were interviewed. This included 1,886 children and 1,947 parents who were interviewed with regards to a Pathfinder sited play area as well as 499 children and 522 parents interviewed with regards to an adventure playground. Where possible, interviews were conducted with both the child and a parent in the same household. In two-parent households, interviewers spoke with the parent who knew most about the child's outdoor play activities.

3.5 Some respondents could not be included in the baseline sample because the local authority withdrew their plans to develop the play site after the fieldwork had commenced. In total, the 'analysis sample' for the Play Pathfinder sited play areas comprised 1,693 children and 1,747 parents, totalling 3,440 individuals. The table below shows a breakdown of the analysis sample of children respondents by key demographic characteristics.

Table 3-1 Demographic profile of children respondents (the analysis sample for Pathfinder sited play areas)

Demographic categories	Number	Percentage
Gender		
- Male	856	51
- Female	837	49
Age		
- 8 – 10	826	49
- 11 – 13	867	51
Disability		
- Yes	181	11
- No	1492	88
- Unknown	20	1
Ethnicity		
- White	1192	70
- BME	480	28
- Asian	128	8
- Black	187	11
- Chinese / Other	73	4
- Mixed	92	5
- Unknown	21	1

Source: Ipsos MORI

3.6 The key purpose of the findings presented below is to set out the baseline position, which will be tracked during the follow-up research in 2010. Consequently, these findings do not offer any insight into the impact of the Government's investments in play areas through the Play Pathfinders and Play Builders programmes. A greater interpretive steer on the survey findings will be given in the final evaluation report, which is scheduled for early 2011.

3.7 The findings below are divided into seven thematic areas, which are formed around the programme outputs and outcomes identified in the evaluation framework. In addition, there is an eighth section which pulls together the findings that relate to disabled access to play spaces, as an area of particular interest to the Department. The findings summarised below are taken from the sample of respondents who were resident in the vicinity of the sited play areas, not the adventure playgrounds. This is because the findings from the adventure playgrounds sample do not differ significantly from them. In the final evaluation report, discrete findings will be presented about the adventure playgrounds, wherein the wave two results will be compared directly with the corresponding baseline results.

3.8 It should be noted that the three strands of research (i.e. surveys, audits and observations) reported below do not cover the entirety of the programme outputs and outcomes in the evaluation framework. That is, some parts of the evaluation framework are addressed by other parts of the methodology, but not the impact case studies. Furthermore, without exception, these three strands of the evaluation method are not the only sources of evidence for the programme outputs and outcomes that are covered. That is, the findings from the impact case studies will be combined (in the final 2011 evaluation report) with those from other parts of the methodology to generate our overall findings with regards to each programme output and outcome.

Findings

Usage of play spaces

3.9 This sub-section provides evidence against the immediate programme outcome 'enhanced use of play spaces' (see evaluation framework discussion in section 2 (above) for details of the outputs and outcomes addressed by the evaluation). The in-home survey among children and parents collected data on levels of usage of play areas in general and of the specific play sites being (re)developed, including frequency of visits, duration of visits and who children are being accompanied by when they visit. In addition, the observation survey captured data on numbers of visitors attending the specific play sites and the profile of participants and activities undertaken when present.

3.10 Around three fifths of children in the local areas near to Play Pathfinder sited play areas had visited some kind of play area in the most recent week of the school term (58%) and school holidays (65%). Children make around three visits per week on average, which was a little higher in holidays (a mean of 2.9 times in term time and 3.3 in holidays). Nonetheless it is somewhat concerning that children do not use the play spaces more during school holidays when they have more free time; this may be because some children do not choose to do so or because their parents choose not to allow them. It will be interesting to observe whether the improved play spaces for both children and adults affect this finding.

3.11 Older children (aged 11-13) tended to visit play areas less frequently than the younger children (8-10), and this was especially the case for girls. In addition, on children's most recent visit to any play site, children aged eight to ten had tended to visit with an adult (72%) and often a sibling (46%). By contrast, 11 to 13 year olds tended to visit independently without an adult (71%), and usually with friends and peers (60%) and/or siblings (34%). These findings are a reminder that children of different ages and genders use play areas in different ways. It is important that the developed play areas plan for this diversity of experience.

3.12 Three in five parents and children (60%) were aware of the Pathfinder play site selected for (re)development near to them and 55% said they had visited it at least once. Overall a fifth of children had visited in the most recent week of school term (19%) and school holidays (22%). These relatively low levels of awareness and usage of the existing, pre-investment sited play areas mean that there is good scope for measuring the impact of the investments on the play sites at the next wave of fieldwork.

3.13 Children from more deprived areas were less likely to have visited the Pathfinder play area (55% of those in areas of high deprivation compared to 69% in areas of low deprivation). However, those in areas of high deprivation who did visit tended on average to visit more frequently (2.8 times on average in the most recent school holiday, compared to 2.0 times amongst children in areas of low deprivation).

3.14 These findings reveal an overall picture of children aged 11 to 13 starting to gain greater independence from their parents in visiting play areas, and visit frequency falling compared to the younger age group of eight to ten. A particular challenge to local authorities in the development of these play areas will be the gender split, with girls aged 11 to 13 visiting play areas less frequently than their male counterparts. It will be interesting to see if the (re)developed sites are more attractive to girls, while also continuing to be attractive to boys.

3.15 The difference in usage by the general level of deprivation of the area is also interesting and it is apparent that children living in more affluent areas have greater choice in local play areas. In the next sub-section, we will see that this appears to be

related to children living in more deprived areas being more likely to rate local parks and play areas poorly. This highlights the importance of investment into local play sites in widening equality of access to high quality play areas.

3.16 With regards to adventure playgrounds, as is expected at this baseline stage, only a small proportion of parents (10%) were aware of an adventure playground in their wider area. Parents reported that just 7% of children had visited such an area in the past two months. Among parents who were aware of an adventure playground, the majority said their child had attended in the last two months (64% of those surveyed around a sited play area and 67% where an adventure playground will be developed).

Satisfaction with play spaces

3.17 This sub-section provides evidence against the immediate programme outcome 'enhanced satisfaction with play spaces'. Using data from the in-home survey, this sub-section examines current satisfaction among children and their parents with play spaces, both in general and specifically the play area receiving investment.

3.18 Nearly two-thirds (64%) of eight to ten year olds, half of 11 to 13 year olds (51%), but under half of parents (45%) rated local parks and play areas in general as 'good' for someone their age to play (or for someone the age of their child in the case of parents). Similarly, children were more positive than parents about the specific Play Pathfinder site (43% compared with 24%) and again eight to ten year olds were more likely to say it is 'good' (49%) than 11 to 13 year olds (38%). In addition, boys were more positive than girls about both play areas locally (55% compared with 47% among 11 to 13 year olds) and the specific play area (41% compared with 32% across the full eight to 13 age range). These findings suggest that the existing play areas are designed primarily for use by younger children and for boys. It reemphasises the need for the redeveloped play areas to plan for a diversity of use by different age groups, genders and adults as well as children.

3.19 Respondents in areas of high deprivation were more likely to say that play areas in their area (and indeed the specific Play Pathfinder site selected for (re)development) are 'very poor' – 17% of parents and 11 to 13 year olds in areas of high deprivation rated local play areas as 'very poor', compared to 5% in areas of low deprivation. This is somewhat surprising when set against the earlier finding that children from more deprived areas tended to visit play areas more frequently than children from less deprived areas. It is not clear what underlies these findings, but it may indicate that children from more deprived areas are faced with a lack of choice over their local play areas. If high satisfaction is a proxy for the quality of play spaces, then the finding suggests historic inequity in levels of investment in play spaces for more and less deprived areas, something to be investigated in the follow-up research. The findings do suggest that local authorities and partners in less deprived areas should

do more to promote outdoor play, and that in more deprived areas there is a need to improve children's outdoor play experience.

3.20 When asked what the children disliked about the specific Pathfinder site selected for (re)development, the most common response was "it's boring" (19% children aged eight to ten and 28% children aged 11 to 13). This suggests that the development of the sites will yield higher levels of positivity. "Gangs and teenagers" (21% children aged eight to ten and 23% children aged 11 to 13) was also among the most frequently decried aspect of pre-developed Pathfinder sites, which suggests an element of user conflict. If one considers also the lower ratings given by girls, a challenge to local authorities will be to develop sites in a manner that meets the needs of different users.

Play area safety

3.21 This sub-section provides evidence against the following programme outputs and outcomes:

- Improved road safety/less traffic in proximity of play spaces (output)
- Enhanced feelings of safety in accessing play spaces (immediate outcome)
- Reduction in perceptions of bullying in and around play spaces (immediate outcome)
- Reduction in criminal/anti-social behaviour in and around play spaces (wider outcome)
- Improved risk taking skills in managed environments (immediate outcome)

3.22 It deals with three aspects of safety, namely safety en route to play, safety from others while at play and safety in the activity of play itself. The sub-section draws together data from the in-home survey, play area observations and play area audits.

3.23 First, in terms of *safety en route* to play, half of parents of eight to ten year olds (51%) said that dangerous roads or traffic near the play area are a very or fairly big problem. The proportions were only a little lower among parents of 11 to 13 year olds (44%) and children aged 11 to 13 themselves (42%). In addition, three-quarters of parents of eight to ten year olds (73%) and as many as nine in ten 11 to 13 year olds (91%) said play areas are easy to walk or cycle to from their house. Taken together, these two findings imply that walking or cycling is the appropriate means of getting to the play area in most cases, but that fears about the safety of the roads may discourage or prevent children from visiting the sites as often as they otherwise might. It is intended that the Pathfinder play areas should be developed alongside measures to improve these safety concerns. It will be interesting to examine to what extent this is realised in the perceptions of respondents to the follow-up survey.

3.24 Second, in terms of *safety from others while at play*, around half of parents (54% of parents of 11 to 13 year olds and 47% of parents of eight to ten year olds) felt that the Pathfinder play area is a bit or very unsafe for children of their child's age to play. Interestingly, 11 to 13 year olds themselves were slightly less wary, with 40% saying they feel the play area is a bit or very unsafe. On a related matter, just over half of parents (55%) and 11 to 13 year olds (56%) thought that people behaving badly is a problem in the play area. A lower proportion considered bullying to be an issue, but proportions were still quite high (40% of parents and 31% of 11 to 13 year olds said that this is a fairly or very big problem in the play area). These combined findings suggest that the broad issue of safety at play warrants close attention, both in planning the redeveloped play spaces and after the spaces have been created. Currently safety issues are likely to present an obstacle to achieving the aims of the programme.

3.25 Third, in terms of *safety in the activity of play itself*, a minority (29%) of children said that there are things to do in the play area that encourage risk taking. This is an indication of the limited level of play opportunities currently in the majority of sites selected for (re)development. Given this low baseline and the Department's intention for authorities to deliver more challenging play opportunities with managed risks for children, this should be an area in which the follow-up survey identifies significant change.

Play area outputs

3.26 This sub-section provides evidence against the following two programme outputs:

- increased supply of play facilities
- increase in the quality of play spaces and facilities.

3.27 Regarding the first of these, this sub-section provides evidence on the opening hours of existing local play sites. Regarding the second programme output, this sub-section looks at the current content of play sites and respondents' views on the variety of things to do at play sites – things for wider family members and supporting facilities, such as seating. Data in this sub-section comes from the in-home survey and the play area audits.

3.28 In terms of the increased supply of play facilities, the majority of Play Pathfinder sites included in the impact case study fieldwork in their pre-investment form had no restrictions on usage, such as opening hours or gates that lock (86%).

3.29 In terms of the quality of play spaces and facilities, play equipment at the sites scheduled for (re)development tended to be limited at the time of the baseline fieldwork with a quarter (26%) of areas having no equipment at all and 44% having between one and four items. The most common items of equipment were traditional ones, such as swings (on 47% of sites), slides (on 44% of sites) and climbing frames

(on 40% of sites). On the positive side, the majority of areas already had natural features such as grass (96%), trees (93%) and bushes, and half (50%) had equipment made of wood. Two-thirds had open space to play in (67%) and many had ball sports pitches (42%).

3.30 Two-thirds (66%) of children said their local Pathfinder play area has a variety of things to do or equipment to play on, but a third (32%) said this is not the case. This finding reflects the significant minorities of children, especially girls, who rated their play area poor as a place to play in general. Furthermore, the majority of children (67% of eight to ten year olds and 53% of 11 to 13 year olds) and also parents of eight to ten year olds (67%) also felt that provision of things "for all the family" is poor.

3.31 Wider facilities and amenities at the sites scheduled for (re)development were relatively basic at the time of the baseline fieldwork: three-quarters (75%) of the play areas had seats for adults, but a quarter (25%) did not, and very few had toilets or refreshments available nearby. Reflecting this, the majority of parents of eight to ten year olds (71%) and of children aged 11 to 13 (59%) rated the area poor in terms of "having things to make your visit comfortable, such as toilets, seats or benches".

3.32 Based on the above, it is clear that local authorities will need to focus on developing a wide range of aspects of play sites, including both play features and wider facilities. The provision of facilities that make the experience more enjoyable for parents as well as children will be important for achieving the objectives of the Government's investment in play. This is particularly important for increasing usage by eight to ten year olds, given their tendency to attend play areas with a parent. It is also important if the investment is to achieve significant gains with regards to the wider outcomes of community cohesion and enhanced social networks, a larger part of which is reliant on the networks and friendships generated between adults while present at the play areas.

Perceptions of and participation in outdoor play

3.33 This sub-section provides evidence against the following programme outputs and outcomes:

- Improvement in maintenance of sites (output)
- Enhanced positive perceptions and attitudes towards outdoor play (immediate outcome)
- Increase in participation of children in outdoor play (immediate outcome).

3.34 Regarding the first of these, the audit survey collected data on the availability of litter bins at the sites scheduled for (re)development, whilst during observational surveys interviewers also recorded amounts of litter, the presence of hazardous substances

and whether equipment was broken or not. In addition, the in-home survey captured views on the upkeep of play areas. Regarding the second programme output/outcome (identified above), the in-home survey explored parental perceptions of the importance of outdoor play for children and also children's views on how fun playing outside and playing sport is. Regarding the third programme output/outcome, the in-home survey recorded levels of playing outside in the past seven days.

3.35 In terms of the maintenance of play areas, half (54%) of children aged 11 to 13 and two fifths (41%) of parents of children aged eight to ten felt the Pathfinder play area (in its pre-investment form) is not very or not at all clean and tidy. In addition, almost half of sites audited had graffiti which fieldworkers perceived not to be permitted (47%) and around a fifth (21%) lacked a litter bin. Furthermore, a fifth (21%) of sites with equipment had broken equipment and hazardous debris was evident on a third (35%) of sites. These levels are high and indicate inadequate maintenance of the play areas at the time of the baseline fieldwork. It will be interesting to note whether and to what extent these findings are diminished after the site is (re)developed.

3.36 In terms of attitudes towards outdoor play, three quarters (75%) of children enjoyed playing outside a lot, which was greatest amongst boys (78%), younger children (80% aged eight to ten), children from White ethnic backgrounds (77%), those in higher social grade families (80% AB) and in areas of lower deprivation (82%). Seven tenths (72%) of children enjoyed playing sport, which was also greater amongst boys (81%) and younger children (74% aged eight to ten). However there was no significant difference by social grade or the level of deprivation of the area, while ethnicity appeared to play only a minor role.

3.37 With regards to parents' attitudes towards outdoor activity, over nine in ten parents felt that regular outdoor play (93%) and participation in sport (91%) are very or extremely important for the health and development of children and young people. These represent very high baseline levels, which, while good in itself, leaves little scope for identifying positive change at the follow-up survey resulting from the Play Pathfinder programme. These high levels also raise the question of what then, if not parents' attitude towards outdoor play, prevents or discourages the greater use of play areas by children. The evidence available from the baseline fieldwork has shown the existence of a link between levels of satisfaction with the play provision and levels of usage. It also reveals a link between levels of usage and parents' perceptions of the level of safety both at and en route to play areas.

3.38 Looking closer at parents' views on the benefits of regular outdoor play, there was no significant variation in these responses between parents of girls and boys. There was, however, variation by the ethnic background of respondents (although these data are based on relatively small sample sizes). Parents of children from Chinese (82%), Asian (87%) and Black (88%) backgrounds were marginally less likely than

parents of White children (95%) and those of a mixed ethnic background (93%) to feel that participation in regular outdoor play is very or extremely important. With regards to participation in sport, however, the variation by ethnicity was minimal: White (90%), Asian (90%), Black (92%), Chinese (93%), and Mixed (96%).

3.39 In terms of participation in outdoor play, two-fifths (43%) of children reported that they play outside for at least thirty minutes either six or seven days per week. However this finding differed by age and gender, with younger children (eight to ten - 50%) and boys (47%) more likely to do so.

Community impact

3.40 This sub-section provides evidence against the following programme outputs and outcomes:

- Involvement of children, families and community in the design and delivery of play spaces (output)
- Increased community cohesion (wider outcome)
- Enhanced social networks amongst families with children aged eight to 13 (wider outcome).

3.41 Regarding the first of these, the in-home survey collected data on how far respondents agree that the council listens to children, young people and parents in the development of play areas in the local area. Regarding the second of these programme outputs/outcomes, the in-home survey explored parental perceptions of people from different backgrounds mixing in the play area, and also whether children had made new friends. Regarding the third programme output/outcome, the in-home survey explored whether parents felt the play area is a good place for parents to meet and chat with parents they might not normally talk to.

3.42 First, as a baseline position, there appears to have been a low level of involvement of children and families in the design and delivery of play spaces. Children aged 11 to 13 (51% not at all/very much, with a further 15% don't know) and parents of children aged eight ten (58% not at all/very much, with a further 23% don't know) tended not to feel that the council listens to children and young people in the development of play areas in the local area. This finding did not vary significantly by social grade or the level of deprivation of the area. On the other hand, parents of Black children aged eight to ten felt more listened to than parents of all children in all other ethnic groups (29% a great deal/fair amount, which is significantly more than 19% overall), although there was no significant difference amongst Black children aged 11 to 13. Parents also tended to feel that their own views are not considered by the local council when developing local play areas, with the majority (57%) saying not very much/not at all. Ethnically White parents (61%, which is significantly greater

than the proportion of parents overall) were particularly likely to have a negative opinion of their involvement by the council.

3.43 It will be interesting to observe whether this low level of involvement in the design and delivery of play spaces changes after the play sites have been developed, as most local authorities have reportedly attempted to engage children and young people and their families in this work. However, due to the localised nature of play areas, these patterns may be more due to particular play areas driving this rather than a general pattern across the sample as a whole. The timings of the in-home survey coincided with local consultation taking place in a number of local authorities regarding the possible development of a local Play Pathfinder site, which may have heightened sensitivity to this measure in particular locales. One consequence is that this is one topic area in which it may not be appropriate to compare the baseline findings with the findings achieved after the site has been (re)developed. The key measure for this issue, therefore, will be the responses gained at the second wave of the survey with children and parents, at which time all play areas will be expected, as a minimum, to have consulted with local children over the design of the play areas.

3.44 Second, with regards to the contribution that play areas make to community cohesion, parents were more likely to say that people from different backgrounds do not really mix together in the play area (51% say not very much/not at all) than that they do (31% say they mix a great deal/fair amount). Interestingly, parents from more deprived areas and in households eligible for free school meals were more likely to think that people from different backgrounds mix together in the play area (35% and 41% a great deal/fair amount, respectively compared to 31% overall). At the second wave of the fieldwork (via the observations and possibly also the survey of children and parents) we will want to collect information on the degree to which people from different backgrounds do indeed use the play areas, against which these responses can be compared. Without this, the findings may simply reflect the heterogeneity of the local population, rather than the role played by the play area in facilitating the mixing of different people.

3.45 Another measure of the contribution made by play areas to community cohesion is the amount of new friendships formed there. The in-home survey found that a third (32%) of children who had been to the play area had made new friends there, however the majority (67%) had not. Interestingly, as above, it was children from more deprived areas who were more likely to have made friends in the play area (35% in more deprived areas had made friends compared to 19% in areas of low deprivation). We will be able to measure the change achieved in this regard in the follow-up survey, but it will not allow us to explain why this occurs and why it varies between areas. This may be one area worth investigating further in the qualitative research that will run in parallel with the second wave of fieldwork.

3.46 Third, in terms of achieving enhanced social networks amongst families with children in the target age range (eight to 13), two thirds (66%) of parents felt the Pathfinder play area (in its pre-investment form) does not offer a good place to meet and chat with other parents. This baseline level provides sizeable scope for improvement in this regard following (re)development of these play areas. Parents of children aged 11 to 13 were significantly more likely than parents of eight to ten year olds to say 'not at all' in this regard (40% compared to 34%). However, it is possible that this finding is simply a function of these parents' lower tendency to visit play areas with their children.

3.47 Overall, these findings create a picture of local Pathfinder play areas forming a valuable hub for certain users, particularly those living in more deprived areas. As described previously, it seems that users in more deprived areas have access to a reduced range of play sites compared to those in more affluent areas, with the consequence that they visit a specific site more frequently.

3.48 A second angle to this issue to be followed up through the second wave of fieldwork is the degree to which the (re)developed play sites will widen the range of users. The interesting issues to note are the likelihood of 11 to 13 year olds to visit with friends, the greater perceived importance of equipment to children in the younger age range, and the lower levels of usage by girls, which suggest that there are already potential conflicts between different user groups. The follow-up research will therefore offer a valuable opportunity to explore whether the development of Play Pathfinder sites is able to widen the number of users in a harmonious manner or if potential conflicts are exacerbated.

Participation in physical exercise

3.49 This sub-section provides evidence against the following two wider programme outcomes:

- increase in participation of children in physical exercise
- increased participation in other types of physical activity.

3.50 These outcomes were explored in the in-home survey through the question which asked how many days children had spent at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things outside of school over the previous week.

3.51 The overall finding from the in-home survey on this matter was that three quarters (75%) of children aged eight to ten (as reported by their parents) and two thirds (65%) of children aged 11 to 13 had spent at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things outside of school on at least three days out of the last seven. There was variation in this finding between boys and girls, particularly in the older age range, with boys being more likely to participate in physical activity outside of school

(78% compared with 71% among eight to ten year olds; 74% compared with 56% among 11-13 year olds).

3.52 There was also variation in this finding by ethnicity, although caution is warranted due to the low base sizes. By this measure, children from an ethnically White background were the most physically active outside of school (75% had spent at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things outside of school on at least three days out of the last seven). By contrast, children from Asian (50%) and Chinese (55%) backgrounds were the least physically active by this measure. Children from Black (60%) and Mixed (62%) ethnic backgrounds were more physically active by this measure, but still less than was the case for children from White backgrounds.

3.53 We will examine the difference in this measure after the Pathfinder sites have been (re)developed, but there will be a limit to our ability to identify achievements against these two wider programme outcomes for two reasons. First, if we find a significant increase in the level of participation in physical activity outside of school, it will not be possible unequivocally to attribute all or even part of that change to the Play Pathfinder investments because we will not know what other activities children are participating in or what stimuli might have affected their decision to increase their levels of physical activity. Second, given the low base sizes, there will need to be a large change at the time of follow-up survey for us to identify a statistically significant change when looking at the ethnic minority groups. For these reasons, this might be another topic area worth investigating further through the qualitative research that will run in parallel with the follow-up survey.

Disabled access to play spaces

3.54 This sub-section examines the accessibility of play areas for children and young people with a disability, providing evidence against the programme output 'improved access to a variety of play spaces (disabled access to play spaces)'. It explores satisfaction with local parks and play areas by this sub-section of the respondents, usage of the specific site scheduled for (re)development and perceptions of the site's suitability for children with disabilities. Using the data from the play area audits, this sub-section also examines whether the play areas scheduled for (re)development currently have facilities for children and young people with a disability.

3.55 Interestingly, children with a disability tended to use local play areas as much as children without a disability. Indeed, children with a disability and their parents were actually more likely to have visited the specific play area (60% compared to 54% of parents whose child does not have a disability). Importantly, however, satisfaction levels were notably lower for children with a disability; just 16% of parents of a child with a disability rated the Pathfinder site as 'good', compared with 25% of parents

whose child does not have a disability. The same trend was found with regards to local play provision in general.

3.56 In terms of facilities designed for children with disabilities, almost none of the surveyed play sites provided toilets with disabled access or notices in Braille, widget or pictorial form. On the positive side, three-quarters of sites surveyed contained paths wide and smooth enough for wheelchair access and had paths with step-free access. Nonetheless the findings emphasise that there is considerable room for improvement in planning for the use of play areas – in terms of access and play experience – by children with disabilities of different types.

Baseline local area reviews

Introduction

3.57 The local area reviews (LARs) provide a compilation of contextual indicators and play-related outcomes indicators for each of the 11 case study Pathfinder local authorities. We will update them with the latest available data near the end of the evaluation in order to identify changes associated with the Play Pathfinder programme. The summary of findings below describes the broad baseline environments that exist across the Pathfinder areas. Further information regarding the methods used for developing the LARs can be found in Chapter Five.

Findings

Contextual indicators

3.58 The LARs include contextual indicators under five headings: child demography, economy, deprivation, crime and safety, and education.

3.59 First, the indicators on child demography included in the LARs identify the number of 8-13 year olds in each area and the proportion of the total population that they represent. Nationally there were 3.6 million 8-13 year olds in 2007, accounting for 7.1% of the total population. The demographic secondary data show the 11 case study areas to have a variety of 8-13 population sizes, ranging from less than 10,000 in Kensington and Chelsea to almost 37,000 in East Sussex. As a proportion of the total population, the 11 case study areas were distributed around the national average, with six areas below the national average and five areas above it. The case study areas with the smallest proportions of 8-13 year olds were Camden (5.2%), Kensington and Chelsea (5.5%) and Bristol (5.9%). By contrast, Knowsley (7.8%), Rotherham (7.6%) and Enfield (7.4%) had the largest proportions of 8-13 year olds.

3.60 Second, the LARs include one economic indicator, which is the proportion of the working age population that is economically active. Nationally, the average for this measure in June 2008 was 78.8% and again the case study pathfinder areas varied quite widely around this figure, although the majority (seven) were below the national average. At the lower end, the local authorities of Kensington and Chelsea and Knowsley had just over 70% of their total working age population economically active. At the upper end, the best performing pathfinder areas by this criterion were Dudley (80.2%) and East Sussex (81.1%).

3.61 Third, in terms of deprivation, the key indicator used in the LARs is the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation, which ranks the local authorities in England. By this measure, all 11 case study areas were in the more deprived half of England; indeed, all but one of them (East Sussex) were in the 30% most deprived areas nationally. The most deprived case study local authorities were Sunderland (ranked 35th) and Knowsley (ranked 5th). At the other end of the spectrum, East Sussex was ranked as the 155th most deprived local authority area in England.

3.62 Fourth, with regards to crime and safety, the LARs include an indicator for the level of perceived anti-social behaviour. Nationally 23% of respondents to a 2006/07 survey perceived anti-social behaviour to be a significant problem. Across the 11 case study local authorities, only two Pathfinder areas (Kensington and Chelsea, 16%, and East Sussex, 20%) were below this national level. In the other nine case study areas, the proportion who thought that anti-social behaviour was a significant problem in their area ranged between 27% and 32%. The highest level was in Knowsley, where 32% thought this to be a problem.

3.63 Fifth, in terms of educational indicators, the LARs report the proportion of children achieving at level 4 or above in both English and Maths at Key Stage 2. In 2007/08, the national average for this measure was 72%. The case study local authorities were distributed around this national figure, with four areas above it, five areas below it and two areas at the national level. At the extremes, Kensington and Chelsea, at 81%, was the only case study pathfinder area that performed significantly above the national average in this regard, while Portsmouth (63%), Bristol (65%) and Rotherham (67%) were notably below the national level.

Play-related outcome indicators

3.64 The LARs include play-related indicators under the following four headings, which will contribute evidence for the impact of the Play Pathfinder programme towards several of the immediate and wider programme outcomes:

- Enhanced use of and satisfaction with play sites and participation in play – this contributes to two of the immediate programme outcomes (enhanced use of play spaces and enhanced satisfaction with play facilities and spaces)

- Increase in the participation of children in physical activity – this contributes to two of the wider programme outcomes (increase in participation of children in physical exercise and increased participation in other types of physical activity)
- Improved health and well-being – this contributes evidence to one immediate programme outcome and two of the wider programme outcomes (reductions in perceptions of bullying in and around play spaces, reduced levels of obesity and improved emotional health and well-being)
- Greater involvement of children in the local community – this contributes evidence to one of the wider programme outcomes (increased community cohesion).

3.65 With regards to the first of these, the secondary data suggest that there was marked variation between the case study pathfinder areas in terms of children and young people's use of local parks or playgrounds. At the national level, 74% of children who participated in the Ofsted Tellus Survey in 2008 had been to a local park or playground in the previous four weeks. The 11 case study areas were distributed around this average figure, although most (7) were below it. At the upper extreme, as many as 84% of children in Camden had been to a local park or playground in the last four weeks. At the other extreme, just 65% of children in Kensington and Chelsea, Knowsley and North Tyneside had done so.

3.66 A second measure used in the LARs, taken from the same source, is the proportion of children who think their local parks and play areas are either fairly good or very good. Nationally, 45% of children can be described, in this way, as being satisfied with their local play provision. Only three of the 11 case study areas (Camden, Kensington and Chelsea and Portsmouth) were above this national level, indicating that there is considerable scope for improvement in most, if not all, the case study local authorities. When compared with the findings above about the usage levels of the local parks and playgrounds, it is interesting that, despite their limited use, children in Kensington and Chelsea and North Tyneside were the most satisfied with the quality of the parks and play areas in their local area. This finding echoes one finding from the baseline impact case studies that, particularly in more deprived areas, the level of satisfaction with the public play provision does not necessarily correspond with the level of their usage.

3.67 Second, in terms of children's participation in physical activity, the key indicator is the proportion of children who had spent at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things in the previous seven days. This too is taken from the 2008 Ofsted Tellus Survey. Nationally, as many as 92% of children had participated in this amount of physical activity. Across the 11 case study Pathfinders, this indicator ranged from 89% in Enfield to 94% in both Camden and Kensington and Chelsea. The already-

high baseline level for this measure will mean that it will be difficult, with any degree of confidence, to note any significant change over the lifetime of the programme.

3.68 Third, with regards to improved health and well-being, the LARs include an indicator compiled by the Department of Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families for the proportion of Year 6 children who are obese. In 2007/08, around 18% of children in their final year of primary school were classified as obese. Among the 11 case study areas, only East Sussex (15.4%) was below this level, indicating that childhood obesity is a relatively minor problem there. At the other extreme, childhood obesity appeared to be relatively high in Enfield, Camden, and Portsmouth, all of which reported that over 22% of children in this age group were obese.

3.69 Another of the indicators on the theme of health and well-being was the proportion of children who state they have been bullied at school. According to the 2008 Ofsted Tellus Survey, 39% of children have been bullied at school. Of the case study pathfinder areas, four reported levels below this national average, but seven areas reported levels of bullying above the national average. Portsmouth (46%), Rotherham (44%) and Kensington and Chelsea (43%) had the highest reported rates of children who had experienced bullying at school. Children in Knowsley (23%) and Enfield (33%) were the areas where children were least likely to have experienced bullying at school.

3.70 The LARs also include indicators for children's emotional health, one of which is the proportion of children who stated they were 'happy about life at the moment' (taken from the 2008 Tellus Survey). Nationally, 69% reported themselves as happy in this way. The 11 case study areas were distributed around this national level, but most reported higher figures, indicating a greater prevalence of emotional well-being among their children. The case study areas with the greatest proportions of contented children were Kensington and Chelsea and Knowsley (both 75%). At the other extreme, Enfield and Bristol had the smallest proportion of children who said they were happy about life.

3.71 Fourth, in terms of the involvement of children in the local community, the LARs include an indicator from the 2008 Tellus Survey for the proportion of children who have given time to help a charity, local group, voluntary group, a neighbour or someone else in the local area. Nationally, 61% of children had given of their time to one or more of these recipients. Of the case study pathfinder areas, most (7) were below this national average. The proportions of 'community-spirited' children were particularly low in Camden (49%) and Knowsley (48%). The highest levels were in Portsmouth (63%), East Sussex (62%) and Kensington and Chelsea (62%), although these were only marginally above the national level.

4. Key findings from the implementation case studies

Introduction

4.1 This chapter addresses the third key objective for the Play Pathfinder evaluation:

- To provide information on how the investment programme is being implemented by local authorities and examples of good practice in the provision of play spaces to inform further development of play policy and spending plans by local authorities and government.

4.2 The evidence presented in this chapter is drawn from two waves of implementation case study visits to Play Pathfinder local authorities. The first wave of 'light touch' case studies was undertaken in October and November 2008, and consisted of a document review and telephone consultations with 15 out of the 20 Wave 1 Play Pathfinder local authorities.[27] The fieldwork for the second wave of more in-depth implementation case studies was carried out in June and July 2009, and involved 18 of the 20 Wave 1 local authorities.[28] It is anticipated that a final wave of implementation case studies will be carried out during 2010/11. Evidence gathered during all three waves will contribute to the assessment of progress and ultimately the success of the investment programme against the following eight DfE programme aims:

- investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits
- the close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space as a core part of the delivery process
- play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally
- play areas are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children
- play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally
- local authorities develop top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning

[27] See 'Evaluation of Play Pathfinders: implementation case studies – early findings' (SQW for DCSF, November 2008).

[28] See 'Play Pathfinders Evaluation: Wave 2 implementation case studies report' (SQW for DCSF, August 2009).

- in Play Pathfinders, that new adventure play sites are staffed and appropriately supervised by play workers
- local councils work to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play.

Findings

Investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits

4.3 All Pathfinders conducted some kind of mapping of play spaces in their area, mostly during the development of Play Strategies, Green Space Strategies or audits undertaken for the BIG Lottery Play Programme. County Councils have relied on local mapping of play provision undertaken at District and Borough Council level. Few local authorities conducted play audits linked to Play Pathfinder investment specifically. Many considered deprivation levels and geo-demographic density data to build a picture of local need and prioritise areas for investment. Play audits included secondary data analysis, mapping software (e.g. GIS), surveys and other forms of community consultation, site visits and external consultants. The resulting play area classifications covered a wide range of factors, including type of play provision, accessibility, condition, journey time, user age, size and equipment, and levels of usage. Most Pathfinders included local authority and non-local authority owned/managed sites in their play audits.

4.4 Criteria for selecting sites for investment varied in some respects between the first and second years of the programme for a majority of Pathfinders. In the first year, pragmatic investment decisions were often made in order to invest Pathfinder funding in a dozen sites by the end of March 2009 and secure 'quick wins', whilst also attempting to complement and extend existing planned investments where possible. Several Pathfinders suggested that, had there been a longer lead-in time and less pressure to complete works by the end of March 2009, their final list of sites for this year may have looked different. Investment decisions in year two benefitted from longer time-scales. This gave Pathfinders greater confidence to develop sites needing planning permission, and to undertake comprehensive consultation and community engagement activities (see next section). The main differences between site selection in years 1 and 2 can be summarised as follows:

- greater use of consultation
- more time for the selection process
- changes to the site nomination structure

- consideration of a broader range of sites and owners
- introduction of new selection criteria
- improved internal capacity and expertise
- secured match funding
- land testing to ensure suitability

4.5 As a result, Year 2 sites in general were likely to be new sites (as opposed to refurbished existing sites), take longer to deliver, and involve more complex issues (e.g. planning permission, site decontamination).

4.6 The process for selecting the adventure playground site was somewhat different to sited play areas. The most common approach was to use data drawn from an audit or mapping exercise and score potential sites against criteria typically including deprivation levels, accessibility, transport links, and catchment area. Project steering group or board members and elected members selected were often involved in deciding the most appropriate site for the adventure playground, indicating a more top-down approach for this higher-profile development.

Good practice in securing 'quick win' investment decisions

- use existing play audit data to identify areas of need and possible sites for development
- focus on sites that will not require planning permission
- select non-contentious sites, possibly where community engagement or consultation activity is already well developed
- use Play Pathfinder funding to enhance BIG funding investments
- direct Play Pathfinder funding to sites already earmarked for imminent local authority investment
- use Play Pathfinder funding to bring forward long-term capital investment projects

The close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space as a core part of the delivery process

4.7 Pathfinders have engaged in wide-ranging consultation activities in order to secure the close involvement of children, families and communities. Whilst such activities were more evident in Year 2 than in Year 1 (see previous section), it is clear that all Pathfinders recognise the importance of involving these groups as a core part of the delivery process.

4.8 Broadly, Pathfinders have involved five groups in different ways in the selection, design and delivery of new and refurbished play spaces:

- *children and young people* – listening to young people, identifying play preferences, informing site selection and design issues (including those related to specific groups of children such as girls or young people with disabilities)
- *parents* – listening to parents' views on play space and encouraging confidence in children's outdoor play (outside the home), promoting the benefits of outdoor play, and risk and challenge within the play environment
- *wider community (including elected members)* – listening to people's concerns about play, challenging negative attitudes towards play, and raising awareness of the benefits of play. Identification of potential sites, encouraging wider community support and ownership for new and improved play spaces
- *Voluntary and community sector* – identifying sites, supporting consultation with young people, informing site selection and design
- *mainstream agencies* – promoting the importance of play, and making links between mainstream (council and external) services and play (e.g. consulting with the police on ways to raise awareness of play amongst PCSOs).

4.9 In consulting on design aspects of play spaces and equipment, given the limited time available in Year 1, many Pathfinders found it necessary to prepare suggested designs and then consult on these. The challenge has been to encourage children to think differently about what play spaces and equipment might look like, particularly when they have been used to accessing fairly standardised spaces and uniform equipment. Most Pathfinders reported that consultation activity lasted longer and went deeper in Year 2 because there was more time to consult before site development work had to begin.

4.10 The most common methods of involving children were public events, often held on site and including family fun days, supervised planting activities with children and road shows, followed by workshops with children and young people (in- and out-of school) and surveys with children and young people. Pathfinders have involved play rangers and sometimes architects specialising in community engagement, and have consulted with parents of children with disabilities in particular. They have worked with schools to involve children in designing play areas, and some have also worked with specialist voluntary and community organisations groups to involve children with disabilities and those from ethnic minority groups. Some Pathfinders have gone further, and involved children and young people directly in Pathfinder management decision making.

Play rangers enable children to contribute their design ideas

For many Pathfinders play rangers have been at the centre of consultation with children. Play rangers facilitate a space for children to lead the consultation process with their creative ideas, often expressing themselves through play itself. This has resulted in more imaginative and less restrictive design briefs focused on activities rather than solely on fixed equipment (for example, children want to climb, jump, travel at speed, rather than have a swing or slide). Play rangers are often involved in visiting sites to facilitate consultation through play activities and they feed back what children are asking for to programme staff creating the design brief.

Children contribute to Pathfinder decision making

In Dudley, a children and young people's decision making panel has been formed which is integral to all Pathfinder decision-making processes. This group has recently been expanded to include children with disabilities, looked after children and children living near the adventure playground. The group has been involved in selecting Year 2 sites and equipment, scrutinizing Year 2 site sketch proposals, and advising on what should go into the adventure playground. It is the key young person decision making group for the delivery of the Pathfinder programme, and will continue to shape the future play service across the borough.

4.11 Pathfinders have also been concerned to secure wider community support for particular development investments, and also to encourage more positive attitudes towards play in general. Without this the longer-term sustainability of play spaces developed with Pathfinder funding may be at risk. The wider community has been consulted through public meetings, leafleting and poster displays, and trips to play sites in other areas. Several Pathfinders identified the need for sustained and ongoing engagement beyond the design and completion of sites to ensure a continuing sense of community ownership. Half of the Pathfinders planned to involve volunteers in the management and maintenance of play sites developed with Pathfinder funding.

4.12 Opposition towards children and young people playing outside was the main issue raised during community consultations surroundings the refurbishments or development of local play sites. Pathfinders reported negative attitudes towards outdoor play particularly among elderly residents and in more prosperous areas. Pathfinders also reported community and parental concerns about dogs and cats fouling play sites without fences, and opposing the 'messy' aspects of natural play. Pathfinders have identified a need to educate the public and parents about the nature of outdoor play and its importance for children, in order to prepare local communities for investment in selected play sites, and ensure the sustainability of the Pathfinder investment.

Tackling negative attitudes and opposition

Several Pathfinders have initiated local play education schemes to remind parents about their own challenging and 'messy' outdoor play experiences. Other approaches to tackling negative attitudes include the following: mailing the Play Strategy to all residents near play sites; poster campaigns promoting play in public buildings (e.g. libraries); placing positive stories about children and young people in the local press; publicising the results of consultations with children and young people to show they do want natural and challenging play; training volunteers to become play champions in local communities; and working with Police Community Support Officers to map incidents of antisocial behaviour in order to demonstrate it is an isolated phenomenon.

The following actions were reported to be effective:

- produce a detailed consultation plan, list all who must be consulted, consult widely and do not miss out key groups
- engage the local community and councillors at the earliest opportunity and provide regular feedback to keep them informed and engaged
- promote the benefits of outdoor play widely - perhaps nationally
- prioritize local buy-in even if this sometimes means changing plans to demonstrate community views are being heard
- consult local residents directly rather than through intermediaries such as tenants and residents associations
- identify and address language barriers early.

4.13 Few Pathfinders have not experienced opposition to the refurbishment or development of play sites; however, such opposition was mostly isolated to one or two sites and generated by a few local residents or particularly vocal individuals. Continued community consultation and engagement and also negotiating compromise solutions to address local grievances were regarded as the most effective way to tackle local opposition. However in some instances Pathfinders have found it necessary to challenge intolerance directly by asserting the right of children to play outside in their community.

4.14 Consultation activities for adventure playgrounds have been somewhat different in many Pathfinders. Adventure playgrounds draw from larger catchments so there is a need to consult more widely and to involve community stakeholders and groups as well as individual children and parents. They have a higher profile and ambitious goals, and offer play opportunities which may challenge some local residents' preconceptions about play and young people. Greater time and effort are required to secure community support and ownership. Some Pathfinders have taken local residents to visit exciting adventure playgrounds in other areas, whilst others have had to address community tensions related to the future use of adventure

playground by children from other parts, and also promote the benefits of adventure play to disaffected local children and their parents.

Involving children, families and communities

Cambridgeshire children and residents have visited adventure playgrounds in London to inform choices and design ideas for their own adventure playground.

Bath and North East Somerset have used mobile play ranger sessions to engage children and consult them on improving local play facilities.

Dudley council officers (accompanied by elected members, police and the local MP) conducted 'evening walks in the park' with children and residents in and around park play spaces during organised evening walks, asking them about their views on play and what people wanted to be available locally.

Groundwork UK, a national environmental regeneration charity which makes extensive use of volunteering, has been working with a number of Pathfinders to encourage the involvement of volunteers.

Play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally

4.15 Quality improvement was an important criterion for Pathfinder investment decisions. Most Pathfinders gathered data on the quality and condition of existing play spaces and facilities when conducting play audits in order to select sites for development. This information was used to prioritise sites for improvement alongside other criteria (see above). The quality of play areas was also expected to feature in some Pathfinders' future local evaluations, through surveys of children and play ranger feedback.

4.16 It is clear that the Play Pathfinder programme has created significant opportunities to improve the quality of play areas. Many Pathfinders considered the quality and play value of play spaces and facilities would have been considerably poorer without the Pathfinder investment. The programme has enabled local authorities to deliver more ambitious plans than would otherwise have been possible, and to aspire to install facilities which offer high play value.

4.17 The design principles promoted in *Design for Play: a guide to creating successful play spaces* (Play England 2008) were widely used by the Pathfinders, but to varying degrees. For example, one Pathfinder had found two of the principles potentially contradictory and had therefore drawn a compromise solution (between using natural materials and enabling access for children with disabilities). Another Pathfinder had undertaken a 'study tour' to observe how the principles were working in practice at completed sites elsewhere, before applying these principles in the development of

their own sites. Concerns were also raised about how to square the innovative *Design for Play* principles with some children's expressed desire for more traditional playgrounds.

4.18 Pathfinders thought that full accessibility is a key element in the design of high-quality play spaces. Several have adopted special design features to ensure all children have full access, including adapted equipment (e.g. basket swings with harnesses), clear signage, surfacing, the use of fencing, and the choice of materials (e.g. for promoting tactile play). Moreover, all of the case study authorities have encouraged greater use of the play areas developed with Play Pathfinder funding (e.g. by holding site launch events, producing publicity materials for local residents, and organising on-site activities with play rangers), in order to promote outdoor play to all children.

4.19 During the second wave of case studies, all Pathfinders were able to report that Pathfinder funding had enabled them to increase the supply of outdoor play opportunities on a scale and within timescales that would not have been possible otherwise. Most also reported greater use of developed play areas than before, suggesting that children do find these sites attractive. They also offered early evidence of the positive benefits resulting from greater take up of the play opportunities:

- anecdotal evidence from parents and local residents about how much children are enjoying new or refurbished sites
- anecdotal evidence of people feeling positive about visible investment in their area
- lower than expected levels of vandalism because young people have more to do
- children using play areas without fences more frequently than previously fenced areas (e.g. on journeys to and from other destinations).

4.20 However some negative impact of greater use of play areas was also reported, including increased vandalism on new play equipment, increasing amounts of litter, and also complaints from local residents about noise and inappropriate use of the space by young people. These findings reflect the need to maintain the high quality of developed sites by arranging ongoing maintenance work. They also reveal a continuing need to promote the positive benefits of play to local communities, and ensure these communities develop an enduring sense of ownership over the sites developed with Pathfinder funding.

4.21 All Pathfinders generally adopted an enlightened approach to risk management in the design of play areas that are challenging and safe. They generally adopted a risk-benefit approach to risk management, rather than seeking to eliminate risk

altogether, in order to enhance the play value of the sites developed with Play Pathfinder funding. Most sought specialist advice on risk and challenging play when designing play areas for development, and have developed policies and procedures for assessing risk (e.g. park inspection criteria, risk registers and assessment criteria).

4.22 The Pathfinders were beginning to plan for ensuring developed parks remain properly maintained, for example by ensuring authority-owned sites are included in the parks' service maintenance schedule and involving local communities (such as Friends of the Parks groups) in site maintenance. However maintenance arrangements for many areas have yet to be finalised, and several Pathfinders expressed concern about meeting additional on-going costs associated with play areas built with natural materials and bespoke equipment. The concerns raised by respondents to the baseline surveys suggest litter and unsafe equipment present barriers preventing use of undeveloped sites, underlining the importance of ensuring developed sites are properly maintained to sustain high-quality outdoor play areas.

4.23 The *Design for Play* principles are also informing Pathfinders' procurement processes[29]. Several have distributed the guidance to their suppliers and also applicants for Pathfinder funding, and they have used the guidance when assessing bids. Several Pathfinders use central procurement services to purchase specialist external design, equipment and building supplies. Procurement in these areas is often done separately rather than in one step in order to allow children to contribute to each stage of delivery. Yet some Pathfinders identified conventional local authority procurement processes as a barrier to the delivery of high-quality and innovative play areas, because of restricted supplier lists and inflexible timescales and selection criteria.

Procurement

North Tyneside has developed a Playsite Tender Framework Agreement, whereby play equipment providers were asked to complete a pre-qualification questionnaire which was used to shortlist organisations to be invited to tender for services.

Play areas are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children

[29] *See Embedding the Play Strategy* (DCSF & DCMS 2010) on procurement under Stages 6 (Develop and adopt a joint commissioning strategy for play) and 7 (Implementing the local play strategy and procurement).

4.24 Pathfinders are taking into account the needs of specific groups in the design of play areas, and most have identified meeting the needs of girls, children with disabilities and ethnic minority groups as being particularly important.

4.25 Many Pathfinders have targeted girls in their consultations with children, for example by working through Brownies or youth groups, and the results have influenced the design of play spaces. For example, in Rochdale consultation with girls identified that this group wanted to be able to access social spaces to sit with friends within play sites, and in North Tyneside consultation with girls has influenced the design of multi-use games areas (MUGAs) to include netball and hockey provision.

4.26 Several Pathfinders have sought external specialist advice to ensure play areas are inclusive of children with disabilities (e.g. Mencap, KIDS and Barnardos). There are particularly good links with such groups amongst the local authorities that are also delivering the DfE Short Break Pathfinder for disabled children (Dudley, Enfield and Sunderland). Most Pathfinders have consulted with parents of and children with disabilities, working through special schools or more widely through community organisations that work with children with disabilities and their families. They have found that parents of children with disabilities often needed support to develop an acceptance of challenge and risk in outdoor play for their children. Pathfinders have adopted a number of measures in order to address the needs of disabled children, such as installing special equipment and materials (for example, basket swings with harnesses, and construction materials which encourage tactile play), and fitting access signage and fencing around sites bordering roads.

4.27 The original Pathfinder plans asked local authorities to identify how they would make sites inclusive of children from minority ethnic groups. Ensuring access for all in play provision was a feature of most Pathfinders' wider play strategies, encompassing children of all ages, children with disabilities, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, deprived communities, children in care, and hard-to-reach groups. Most Pathfinders have consulted directly with BME groups through their delivery work, including travellers, by targeting representative groups and schools. However, there was a feeling that Pathfinders did not find it useful to think in terms of a single 'BME' group whose needs should be met. Rather, Pathfinders might have very specific groups within their community that have traditionally been 'hard to engage' and play is providing an opportunity to engage such groups. The involvement of BME groups seemed to be linked more strongly to influencing cultural attitudes towards play, promoting this as a positive activity, and encouraging the use of play spaces.

Play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally

4.28 Pathfinders generally took a holistic approach to improving the safety of children on their way to local play areas. These combined both physical infrastructure

developments (e.g. pedestrian crossings and traffic calming measures) with developing children's road safety awareness (e.g. working with school travel teams and play rangers), and involved cross-departmental collaboration in a majority of Pathfinders (e.g. with parks, transport and children's services). Pathfinders referred to guidance and used site inspections to maximise efforts to improve safe access. Most Pathfinders worked directly with transport and highways departments (see below). The role of these departments in the promotion of road safety included (but was not limited to) signage, the installation of pedestrian crossings, and cycling proficiency training. In some Pathfinders these departments provided specialist strategic expertise on access and safety.[30]

Safe access to play areas

Pathfinders provided road safety training to children in order to promote safe travel to and from play spaces, including cycle training and walking promotion schemes. Some also worked with school travel teams to optimise road safety awareness in general, and one had operated a 'walking bus' scheme to promote safe foot travel to play areas. Pathfinders worked with transport and highways departments to achieve safe access to play areas in several ways, including the following:

- including transport and highways on Pathfinder steering groups and consultation with them around the development of specific sites
- creating new 20 mph zones and pedestrian crossings around play areas
- ensuring play areas are in alignment with safe routes to school
- ensuring easier access for wheelchair users and those with pushchairs (e.g. installing dropped kerbs)
- creating new cycle routes linking play areas
- installing signage to play areas near safe road crossing places.

4.29 Pathfinders appreciated the importance of developing play areas which encourage the development of risk-taking skills within managed environments. They have specific policies or models in place for assessing risk, including park inspection criteria, risk registers, local authority risk assessment logs, and risk management

[30] *See Embedding the Play Strategy* (DCSF & DCMS 2010) on dealing with the fact that play cuts across many local authority responsibilities. The recommended best practice is for the creation of a local play partnership to lead and coordinate the development of a local play strategy, which, in turn, should report to the Children's Trust Board. However, the guidance is that the Children's Trust partnership alone cannot deliver the friendly, safe and accessible spaces that will be essential to the success of the Play Strategy; close working with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is also required. The LSP, by bringing together town and highway planning, environmental services, adult social care, housing, transport and leisure and so on, is in a unique position to strategically influence and improve communities' quality of life and to promote improvements to the built environment that meet people's needs, including promoting safer and more attractive public places for children to play and teenagers to meet.

software such as RISGen. Play site risk assessments involving health and safety teams (including ROSPA inspections) and sometimes external experts often followed a cost-benefit approach rather than seeking to eliminate risk altogether. This reflects a generally enlightened approach to managing risk, which encompasses raising public awareness of the benefits of risk taking on the one hand and in some cases considering liability issues and negotiations with insurers on the other.

4.30 Most Pathfinders have sought specialist advice on risk and challenging play during the design process, typically from design and access officers, voluntary organisations or members of Play Partnerships, in order to design sites that help children to develop their risk-taking skills. In doing so Pathfinders have taken into account the needs of specific groups, including children with disabilities and their families, partly to comply with relevant statutory duties but also from a genuine desire to ensure inclusivity and adopt best-practice guidance (specialist guidance such as the *Manifesto for Inclusive Design* as well as *Design for Play*). This commitment is evident in the way Pathfinders address the needs of specific groups when designing play sites which encourage the development of risk-taking skills, and involve play rangers and voluntary organisations in the selection of sites and construction materials.

Local authorities develop top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning

4.31 Pathfinders regarded establishing strong strategic links with internal local authority departments as being essential to securing the long-term future for play. All of the 2009 case study local authorities have integrated play into other areas of local authority planning and policy formation processes through the development of their play strategies (the development of play strategies was a precondition of receiving Big Lottery funding). In around half of the case study authorities, other departments were represented on core play management teams, and play strategies reportedly influenced planning and expenditure in these departments. They typically included parks and leisure, transport and highways, environmental management, planning and housing departments. The same departments were often represented on the Play Partnerships convened by play management teams to steer the design and delivery of local play provision.

4.32 For example, parks and housing departments' strategic planning and service delivery were reported to have changed as a result of their involvement with Play Partnerships and Play Pathfinder management teams. Some local authorities reported that these departments are now providing more and better opportunities for play. Before the Pathfinder these departments typically would have purchased play equipment from manufacturers' catalogues and commissioned play site designs from in-house teams without consulting more widely. Since their involvement with the

Play Partnership and Pathfinder teams, officers have begun to appreciate the value of consulting schools and designing play areas with natural materials, and are now more committed to maintaining play sites of this nature.

4.33 In addition to engaging internal authority departments, Pathfinders reported a wide range of external stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of play provision. These included Primary Care Trusts, schools and colleges, voluntary and community sector organisations, and registered social landlords. Most of these external stakeholders were members of Play Partnerships. Upper-tier authorities also worked closely with their district and borough councils to allocate Pathfinder funding for the development of local play areas. Thus wider stakeholder engagement is generally strong across the Pathfinders.

Engaging mainstream services

The Dudley Pathfinder team have worked closely with the police on consultation activities. Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) have been identified as a key source of support for the programme given the time they spend in local communities. The PCSOs talk with local communities and can change attitudes towards play, encouraging an acceptance of the value of play and challenging negative attitudes which automatically associate groups of young people with anti-social behaviour. All PCSOs in Dudley cover play during their induction.

In Play Pathfinders, that new adventure play sites are staffed and appropriately supervised by play workers

4.34 None of the adventure playgrounds had been built by the time the first and second waves of implementation case studies were carried out, so it was too early for most Pathfinders to discuss how they would be operated in detail. However all anticipated that their adventure playground would be staffed and appropriately supervised by paid play workers. Many Pathfinders intended to open their adventure playgrounds on a daily basis, including weekends, and half proposed to open them for between 21 and 30 hours per week. Most were planning to recruit additional paid or voluntary staff.

Local councils work to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play

4.35 Plans for the deployment of play workers varied between Pathfinders. A minority of sites will be regularly staffed, and only one Pathfinder planned to staff all of its sites

regularly. A more common arrangement was either to staff all sites but not regularly, or to regularly staff a handful of sites.

4.36 Only a minority of Pathfinders planned to involve volunteers in supervising play. Where it was planned, this was on only a minority of sites within each area, and in some cases it was limited to the adventure playground and working with disabled children. Developing volunteering was generally seen as time consuming, something that may be pursued at a later date. The intention to use volunteers was more common in the management of play sites, most commonly through Friends of Parks groups (particularly for adventure playgrounds) and also in the maintenance of play areas, but this was often limited to the reporting of maintenance needs rather than its delivery.

4.37 Most Pathfinders provided training for play staff. A wide range of formal and informal activities were offered: induction training, attendance at conferences and events, play work qualifications at Levels 2 and 3, SkillsActive activepassports, disability training, safeguarding and inclusion training, senior play ranger training, play shaper training, inspections training, first aid, child protection, risk in play adventure play building training, natural play training, safer neighbourhoods training, and management training.

4.38 The implementation case studies suggest Pathfinders are improving the supply of professional play workers. While it is difficult to ascertain the current qualification levels of play workers, the plans for their development offer an insight into the current state of the workforce. The majority of Pathfinders were planning new or additional training for staff.

5. Approaches to local impact monitoring and value for money assessment

Introduction

5.1 This chapter addresses the fourth and fifth key objectives for the Play Pathfinder evaluation:

- To identify the best way of locally monitoring the impact of play opportunities on outcomes for children and young people on a longer-term basis, including a review of secondary data sources that can be drawn on to provide evidence on local authority play provision
- To enable comparisons to be made of the cost-benefit ratios of different types of spending on play facilities, which shall also provide evidence of the cost-benefit ratios achieved by spending on play compared to other types of spending for which cost-benefit ratios are available.

5.2 First, we describe an approach to the long-term monitoring at the local level of the impact of play opportunities for children and young people. Second, we present the framework we have devised for assessing value for money for this evaluation.[31]

Approach to long-term local impact monitoring

5.3 One of the objectives for the evaluation is to identify the best way, on a longer term basis, of locally monitoring the impact of play opportunities on outcomes for children and young people. Our response to this is encapsulated in the local area reviews that we have developed for the purposes of this evaluation, but which can be continued relatively easily by the Department, the local authorities or other partners after the conclusion of this evaluation and the programme itself. It entails the use of publicly available sources that are expected to be published periodically on an ongoing basis, for which results are available at the local authority level. The method for these local area reviews is described below.

5.4 As a possible addition to this approach, we would draw attention to guidance that has been produced by Play England, available on their website, which will assist local authorities to monitor the outputs and immediate outcomes from their investments in local play provision. The Play England local play indicators were developed to support local authorities in assessing and managing their own performance in providing play opportunities to local children. The indicators focus on participation, access, quality and satisfaction of local spaces and facilities for play

[31] 'Evaluation of DCSF Play Pathfinder and Play Builder Programmes: Value for money framework' (3rd June 2009)

and informal recreation. These tools would be complementary to, rather than a replacement for, the local area review method.

The method for the local area reviews

5.5 A local area review will be produced for each of the 11 case study Pathfinder local authority areas. Each local area review comprises two sections: one providing contextual indicators and a second providing play-related outcome indicators. The general context section presents statistics on the demography, economy, deprivation, crime and safety, and education in each local authority. It is not anticipated that the Play Pathfinders programme will impact directly on these. The second section presents statistics on play participation, physical activity, health and wellbeing, and community involvement. These are all areas in which the programme could potentially have impact. The general approach for the local area reviews is that data are collected for the period before and after programme investments have been made, in order to identify any changes that may be attributable to the investments. It should be noted, however, that attributing impact through secondary data is a difficult task as there may be other factors contributing to any change that is identified, and also that it may take many years for subtle changes to be evident through secondary data indicators.

5.6 Indicators were selected for inclusion in the local area review analysis against the following criteria:

- *Geography*: At what geographical level are the data available? Are the data available for areas throughout the whole of the country?
- *Accuracy/robustness*: Is the data source reliable and expected to be accurate? Are the data reasonably stable or likely to change year-on-year?
- *Access*: Who owns the data source? How easy are the data to obtain? Does it rely on special collection exercises? Is it free/in the public domain? Are there any ethical/data protection issues around use of the data? Do we need to obtain respondent consent?
- *Timeliness*: How recent are the data?
- *Coverage*: Does the indicator cover all children, or only some ages and phases or some other subset of children?

5.7 The following table provides full details of the indicators and data sources that have been used in the local area review analysis, split by whether they provide contextual information or information relating to the desired outputs and outcomes for the programme.

Table 5-1 Indicators used in the LAR analysis

Indicator	Source
Contextual indicators	
Total number of 8-13 year olds	Office for national Statistics (ONS)
Proportion of total population aged 8-13	ONS
Proportion of total population aged 8-13 by ethnic group	ONS
Proportion of working age population economically active	Annual Population Survey
Local authority average rank of multiple deprivation	Index of Multiple (IMD) 2007
Local authority average rank of income deprivation	IMD 2007
Proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (nursery and primary schools)	Department for Education
First time entrants to the Youth Justice System aged 10-17 (per 10,000 10-17 year olds)	DfE / Youth Justice Board
Proportion of respondents with a high level of perceived anti-social behaviour (composite measure)	Local Government User Satisfaction Survey
Achievement at level 4 or above in both English and Maths at Key Stage 2 (National Indicator 73)	DfE
Persistent absentees (as a proportion of the total number of primary and LA maintained secondary school enrolments)	DfE
Play output/ outcome indicators	
Proportion of children who have been to a local park or playground in the last four weeks	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who think the parks and play areas in their local area are either fairly good or very good	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who state they would like to go to a local park or playground but don't at the moment	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who have spent at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things in the last seven days	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who have participated in any group activity led by an adult outside school lessons in the past four weeks (such as sports, arts, youth groups)	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of Year 6 children obese	The National Child Measurement Programme, Department of Health & DfE
Proportion of children stating they are very healthy or quite healthy	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who state 'being healthy' when asked what they most worry about	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who state they have been bullied at school	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who state they have been bullied somewhere else (including on your journey to or from school)	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who state 'nothing' when asked what they most worry about	Ofsted Tellus Survey
Proportion of children who state 'true' to the following statements:	Ofsted Tellus Survey

Indicator	Source
'I am happy about life at the moment'	
'I have one or more good friends'	
'When I'm worried I can talk to my mum or dad'	
'When I'm worried I can talk to my friends'	
'When I'm worried I can talk to an adult other than my mum/dad'	
Proportion of children who have given their time to help a charity / local group / voluntary group / a neighbour or someone else in the local area	Ofsted Tellus Survey

Source: SQW Consulting

Value for money framework

5.8 In this interim evaluation report, we do not yet present findings about the value for money of the programme, but here describe the structure around which it will be assessed at the conclusion of the evaluation and the data that will be collected for the purpose. Assessing value for money is about comparing the costs of a programme with the inputs, outputs, outcomes and final benefits it generates which are additional and would not have happened in the counterfactual scenario without the programme.

5.9 Value for money can be described through cost effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis, both of which will be employed in the evaluation. Throughout, the analysis will be careful to use evidence about what would have happened in the counterfactual – collected from local authority views about what would have happened without funding and from analysis of primary survey data.

5.10 Cost effectiveness is measured through:

- *Economy*[32]: comparing costs with the inputs they purchased
- *Efficiency*: comparing outputs with the inputs used to achieve them. For example, cost per play area developed or improved
- *Effectiveness*: comparing outcomes and impact with the programme's objectives. For example, cost per measure of increased play.

5.11 Cost-benefit analysis involves comparing the cost of delivering the programme and bringing about improvements in play areas with the monetary value of benefits[33] - for example, the enjoyment and other benefits of increased play converted into a monetary value.

5.12 These descriptions show that the definition and measurement of costs, inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact (and the monetary value of outcomes) is central to

[32] Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness are the '3Es' set out in the National Audit Office framework for assessing value for money

[33] This is the approach promoted in the Treasury Green Book

assessment of value for money. From there, various ratios can be developed to describe value for money and benchmarks from other interventions can show how well the programme compares.

5.13 The value for money assessment in this evaluation will be based largely on programme monitoring data and on quantitative measures from the in-home survey and play area observations. These results will be presented alongside a more narrative description of qualitative measures from the survey and of general trends shown in the secondary data (c.f. the local area reviews). The remaining sections discuss each indicator-type in turn showing how the value for money assessment will specify and utilise evidence from the evaluation.

Costs and Inputs

5.14 We will gather evidence on costs for the programme as a whole and for individual authorities from the Department and from local authorities *via* monitoring tools, as shown in the table below.

Table 5-2 Costs and data sources for them

Measure	Source
Whole-programme funding (top-down measurement)	DfE grant allocation (covering all Play Pathfinder and Play Builder authorities)
Local authority-level costs, by type of cost (i.e. input type) and type of play site (bottom-up measurement)	Monitoring data being collected by Play England (the analysis will use data for the 11 Pathfinder and 10 Play Builder case study authorities)
Funding sources other than DfE	

5.15 When considering inputs (as for outputs and so on), it is important to uncover what the funding has achieved that is additional to what would have happened anyway – that is, the additionality of the programme. We are exploring ways to ask local authorities about this through the monitoring data, but will also be collecting evidence from implementation case study discussions.

Outputs

5.16 For the outputs listed below, we will use information from Department- and local authority-based monitoring tools on the programme as a whole and those generated by individual local authorities. We will perform this being careful to adjust the number of sites to discount those that would have happened even without the new funding and consider only additional sites. Evidence on additionality will be collected through the implementation case studies which will ask about whether the developments would have happened without funding, would have happened later or would have happened in a different way.

Table 5-3 Outputs and data sources for them

Measure	Source
Additional sites built or refurbished/improved/maintained (top-down measurement)	DfE grant allocation (covering Play Pathfinder authorities and Play Builder authorities)
Additional sites built or refurbished/improved/maintained (bottom-up measurement)	Monitoring data being collected by Play England (The analysis will use data for the 11 Pathfinder and 10 Play Builder case study authorities)
Awareness of play area by children and parents within easy reach	In-home survey (In the 11 Pathfinder and 10 Play Builder case study authorities)

Immediate outcomes

5.17 Play, which is enjoyable for children, is an outcome in itself. Increases in play will be measured in the ways shown in the table below using a methodology that isolates additional play generated as a result of investment via the programme. In this case, additional play is the increase in play seen between the baseline and follow-up surveys.

Table 5-4 Immediate outcomes and data sources for them

Measure	Source
Additional children attending and using the sites	Site observations (In 11 Pathfinder authorities)
Additional children visiting a play space at least once in the last seven days	In-home survey (In the 11 Pathfinder and 10 Play Builder case study authorities) extrapolated to give estimates of the total population impact, based on the sample survey
Additional children spending at least 30 minutes playing outside in the seven days	
Additional children spending at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things outside school in the last seven days	
Number of children spending at least 30 minutes at their local park or play area during their most recent visit	

5.18 Additional contextual information will come from secondary data as reported in the local area reviews. The single most important source is the Ofsted Tellus survey which, for example, asks whether children have spent at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things in the last seven days and whether they have participated in any group activity led by an adult outside school lessons in the past four weeks.

Longer-term outcomes

5.19 The scale of the evaluation and its timing will not allow us to directly measure longer-term outcomes, such as health or education benefits. Having reviewed the available evidence, we believe it will be possible to infer the following from the immediate outcomes we can measure.

Table 5-5 Longer-term outcomes

Measure	Source
Health benefits from increases in physical play (measured in Quality Adjusted Life Years[34]) =	Survey data combined with NICE[35] guidance
number of additional children spending at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things outside school in the last seven days	(Covering 11 Pathfinder authorities; 10 Play Builder authorities)
X	
Quality adjusted life year benefit per increase in exercise	

5.20 Data taken from the Ofsted Tellus survey will also be used to illustrate local authority-level trends in the proportion of children who state 'being healthy' when asked what they worry most about and the proportion of children stating they are very healthy or quite healthy.

Valuation of outcomes

5.21 Although our literature review (performed specifically for the value for money assessment) highlighted that the outcomes from play are wide-reaching and important, not all outcomes can be valued. Our numerical analysis will be limited to the following:

Table5-6 Valuation of outcomes

Measure	Source
A value of the enjoyment benefit of increased play, using measures of the travel-time costs that children and parents are willing to incur to reach the play sites, before and after site development.	Travel-distance measures calculated from postcode data in the in-home survey[36] (For the 11 Pathfinder and 10 Play Builder case study authorities) Guidance on travel-time valuation[37]

Value for Money ratios

5.22 We will combine the measures described above into the value for money ratios shown in the table below. These will be based on monitoring data and data collected as part of the evaluation. Because of their more general nature, we do not propose to use evidence from secondary data for this part of the analysis.

[34] The National Institute of Clinical Excellence uses Quality Adjusted Life Years to compare different treatments. See http://www.nice.org.uk/newsroom/features/measuringeffectivenessandcosteffectivenesstheqaly.jsp

[35] *Modelling the cost effectiveness of physical activity interventions* (National Institute of Clinical Excellence, 2005)

[36] Measuring value through travel time is a means of non-market valuation that uses 'revealed preferences' – see HMT Green Book for discussion of non-market valuation

[37] Department for Transport Guidance

5.23 As can be seen, there is no benchmark (that has been found at least) for several of the ratios against which to compare the value for money ratios achieved by the programme. This re-emphasises the innovativeness of the investment being made through this and the Play Builder programmes and the contribution that this evaluation is making to the wider understanding of public investments in play.

Table 5-7 Value for money ratios

Ratio-type	Ratio	Benchmark found, and source
Economy: Cost per input	It will be difficult to define inputs in a way that they can be consistently compared with cost, across the programme. However, we will describe the scale of spending on different elements of the programme, such as consultation, design, build etc.	None
Efficiency: Cost per output:	Cost per additional sites built or refurbished/improved	None
Effectiveness: Cost per outcome:	Cost per additional number of children attending and using the sites	None
	Cost per additional number of children visiting a play space at least once in the last seven days	None
	Cost per additional child spending at least 30 minutes playing outside in the seven days	None
	Cost per additional child spending at least 30 minutes doing sports or other active things outside school in the last seven days	Cost per person increasing their exercise – DoH evaluation (~ £260 to £2,790[38])
	Cost per Quality Adjusted Life Year (inferred long-term outcome from increased exercise)	Cost per Quality Adjusted Life Year – NHS evaluations (~£50 to ~£70 thousand[39])
Cost-benefit analysis. Cost per valued benefit:	Cost per monetary value of enjoyment from increased play	Cost per valued benefit – A general decision rule is that where valued benefits exceed costs the investment is worthwhile (though where costs exceed valued benefits, views on the unvalued benefits can still justify investment). No benchmarks have been found in the area of play

Presentation of Value for Money Results

5.24 These value for money calculations will depend on two main data sources – the in-home survey and local authority-level monitoring data collected by Play England. (High-level funding data from the Department will give a top-down check on some of the headline figures such as cost per play area.) The value for money analysis will be driven by the final form of these two datasets.

5.25 The nature of the data being collected by Play England has not yet been finalised, so may affect what analysis is possible – depending, for example, on the detail it collects on types of spending, on non-Departmental funding sources and on the degree to which play site developments would have happened in the absence of funding. In addition, the in-home survey component of the value for money

[38] *Evaluation of the Local Exercise Action Pilots* (Department of Health 2007)

[39] Ibid ; *Promoting physical activity for children: Cost effectiveness analysis* (NICE 2008)

calculation cannot yet be confirmed. The nature of the responses and achieved response rate will affect the type of analysis and sub-group analysis that is possible, with implications for how confidently the value for money results can be aggregated from the sample survey up to inferences about the population of Play Pathfinder and Play Builder areas.

6. Implications and next steps

Implications for local authorities

The baseline findings provide an agenda for change …

6.1 While it is acknowledged that outdoor play contributes to improvements in children's health, wellbeing and social behaviour, the **literature** shows that it is extremely difficult to demonstrate causal relationships between outdoor play and these outcomes. However it does indicate that physical outdoor play in natural environments that involves challenge and managed risk-taking, as epitomised by adventure playgrounds, is more strongly associated with (i.e. 'contributes to' rather than 'demonstrably causes') these outcomes than other forms of play typically found in traditional playgrounds.

6.2 The **literature**, and also the **early research** on non-Pathfinder developed play areas, shows that the main barriers to outdoor play are more likely to be attitudinal rather than infrastructural. Unsurprisingly, adults and children often hold different views about play. Parents and carers often raise risk and safety concerns (both en route and on site safety), as do local authorities, worried about litigation following accidents; local residents sometimes object to noisy outdoor play. Parents and carers obviously have a large influence on children's attitudes towards outdoor play; however, children's expectations about what play is are also shaped by their experience of play. In many cases children's experience of play will be a far cry from the play spaces visionary designers and planners would like them to enjoy. The availability and skills of play workers are also likely to have an effect on reducing parents' concerns about safety and broadening children's views about wider possibilities in outdoor play.

Implications for local authorities

- develop play spaces that enable physical activity
- raise aspirations and tackle negative attitudes towards outdoor natural play
- ensure play areas are safe to access and use but also challenging and fun
- build the capacity of the play workforce to enable more adventurous play.

6.3 The **early research** on non-Pathfinder developed play areas shows that the redevelopment of existing play areas does lead to a desired increase in use by existing and new users.

Implications for local authorities

- ensure adequate visibility into and across play areas
- cater for the play preferences of boys and girls of different ages and abilities
- provide facilities such as seating and toilets.

6.4 The **baseline impact case studies** confirm the value parents ascribe to outdoor activities for children's health and development, and also the popularity of sport and outdoor play among children, particularly younger children aged 8-10, boys in general, and children in deprived areas. However, they also reveal lower levels of satisfaction with sites scheduled for development among older children aged 11-13, children in deprived areas, and children with disabilities. Overall user satisfaction is strongly correlated with how well a site is maintained. Parents and children also expressed concern about safety at these sites, and most did not feel that they provided a good place to meet other parents or for children to make new friends. Generally, children and parents did not feel that the local authority listened to their views.

Implications for local authorities

- involve parents and children in site selection, design and ongoing maintenance
- encourage girls aged 11-13 and children from ethnic minority backgrounds in particular to participate in sports and outdoor activities
- pay particular attention to meeting the needs of children with disabilities and their families
- ensure developed play areas are safe and well maintained, and promote safe routes to them
- encourage parents and families to meet and socialise around children's play.

… to which Pathfinders are responding

6.5 The **implementation case studies** show that most Pathfinders are responding to this agenda for change and are making good progress towards delivering the eight key aims for the Play Pathfinder intervention.

Investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits

Implications for local authorities

- longer lead-in times for play area development offer more options for site selection, design and development

- the Pathfinder investment is expected to have a significant impact on the shape of local play provision; given that they were carried out before this investment, local authorities should consider planning new needs analyses and play audits to take account of this change.

The close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space as a core part of the delivery process

Implications for local authorities

- extend the involvement of children, families and communities beyond site selection and design in order to develop an enduring sense local ownership
- strengthen the contribution of children in play planning and management decision-making processes.

Play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally

Implications for local authorities

- promote the benefits of outdoor play in general and the newly developed play areas in particular
- establish sustainable arrangements for the maintenance of play areas developed with Pathfinder funding.

Play areas are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children

Implications for local authorities

- promote the benefits of outdoor play for children to girls aged 11-13 and minority ethnic groups in particular
- ensure the needs of children with disabilities and their families are met.

Play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally

Implications for local authorities

- work with highways and parks departments to improve safety on routes to play areas
- ensure sites encourage challenging play and managed risk taking
- raise public awareness of the benefits of challenging and natural outdoor play.

Local authorities develop top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning

Implications for local authorities

- strengthen links between play services and Children's Trusts and Local Strategic Partnerships, in line with statutory guidance.[40]

In Play Pathfinders, that new adventure play sites are staffed and appropriately supervised by play workers

Implications for local authorities

- develop plans for managing and operating adventure play sites, including staffing arrangements.

Local councils work to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play

Implications for local authorities

- improve intelligence about the size, qualifications and training needs of the play workforce, and the contribution of volunteers to supporting local play.

Next steps

6.6 The evaluation is due to report by March 2011. By this time the following steps will have been undertaken:

[40] *Children's Trusts: statutory guidance on inter-agency cooperation to improve wellbeing of children, young people and their families* (DCSF 2008), *para. 2.8; The Play Strategy* (DCSF/DCMS 2008), Chapter 7.

- a **follow-up longitudinal survey** of children and their parents in 2010, collecting general usage data and wider outcome measures linked to health and well-being, in the form of telephone interviews following up the original sample of respondents interviewed in 2009
- post-intervention **play area observations** in 2010, collecting detailed usage data on the number and profile of users and the nature of usage, and comparing the results with the pre-intervention baseline conducted in 2009
- post-intervention **play area audits** in 2010, collecting data about the key features of play sites, such as what they contain and their physical upkeep and maintenance, and comparing the results with the pre-intervention baseline conducted in 2009
- **qualitative research** with children and their parents in 2010, collecting detailed information on users' experiences of the play provision and their perceptions on the impact of improvements to play areas
- the final wave of **implementation case studies** in early 2011, comprising interviews with local authority staff involved in the strategic development and delivery of play facilities, in order to assess the way in which the aims of the programme are being delivered and identify good practice
- post-intervention **local area reviews** in 2010/11, comprising secondary analysis of administrative data and existing surveys for each of the 11 Play Pathfinder case study areas, comparing the results with the pre-intervention local area reviews conducted in 2009
- **cost-benefit analysis**, in order to analyse the overall costs and benefits of the Play Pathfinder programme, based on data collated through the impact surveys, observations and local-level indicators collected through the local area reviews.

This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

Findings from the Play Builders 2009 implementation case studies

Michael Frearson, Stuart Johnson & Charlotte Clarke

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1:Findings

Introduction

6.1 In December 2007, the *Children's Plan* (DCSF 2007) announced that the (then Labour) Government would support local authorities in the development of exciting public play areas and new adventure playgrounds. A total of £235 million was distributed to 30 Play Pathfinder and 122 Play Builder local authorities in some of the most deprived parts of the country. The 2008 *Play Strategy* (DCSF/DCMS 2008) confirmed the Government's intention was to ensure 'every child and young person has access to enjoyable, safe and stimulating play opportunities within local communities that respect and value children's play' by 2020.[41]

6.2 The 122 local authorities, designated as 'Play Builders' under the programme, received an average of £1.1 million in capital and £45,000 in revenue funding to develop at least 22 free play areas for children, with a focus on the 8-13 age range. (There were also 30 Play Pathfinder local authorities which received an average of £2.1 million in capital and £500,000 in revenue to create an adventure playground and develop at least 28 free play areas.) Every top-tier local authority in England received play funding between April 2008 and March 2010 to work closely with children, families and communities in order to refurbish or create new play areas, and so to 'transform local areas into innovative and adventurous play spaces'.[42]

6.3 In 2008, the (then) Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned SQW and Ipsos MORI to conduct a small-scale review of the Play Builders programme alongside the more substantial evaluation of the Play Pathfinders programme. The original Play Builders review plan included three elements:

- 'light touch' implementation case studies with ten Play Builder local authorities
- a longitudinal survey of around 1,000 children aged eight to 13 and their parents/carers
- a limited cost-benefit analysis for the Play Builder case study areas, reflecting the fact that less data will be collected for Play Builders than for Play Pathfinders.

[41] *Embedding the* Play Strategy*: Guidance for local authorities, Children's Trust Boards and Local Strategic Partnerships on planning and sustaining provision for children and young people's play and informal recreation* (DCSF 2009)

[42] http://www.playengland.org.uk/our-work/playbuilders-and-play-pathfinders (accessed January 2011)

6.4 SQW and Ipsos MORI reported baseline findings from the longitudinal survey of children and parents/carers in January 2010. In 2010, the incoming Government reviewed the 2010-11 Play programme budgets to identify potential savings that could help contribute to tackling the budget deficit, and grant funding to local authorities was reduced. In order to allow flexibility in a time of reducing budgets, the (renamed) Department for Education committed to not impose unnecessary spending constraints or burdens of monitoring on local authorities. In light of these policies, the national evaluation of the Play programme was ended early, and the final Play Builder review report (including cost-benefit analysis) did not take place.

6.5 This report presents findings from the Play Builder implementation case studies conducted in 2009, and represents the final output from the Play Builder review. It addresses the third objective for the national play evaluation:

> *To provide information on how the investment programme is being implemented by local authorities and examples of good practice in the provision of play spaces to inform further development of play policy and spending plans by local authorities and government.*

6.6 The findings presented are based on 31 telephone interviews conducted in June and July 2009 with staff who were responsible for implementing the Play Builder programme at ten local authorities. Interviewees included Play Builder project managers, senior staff from parks, sport and housing directorates, play project workers and community development workers, at upper-tier and district councils. The findings contribute to an assessment of progress in the implementation of the Play Builder programme near the beginning of its second year. They address the following Departmental programme aims:

- investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits
- the close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space as a core part of the delivery process
- play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally
- play areas are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children
- play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally
- local authorities develop top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning

- local councils work to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play.

Findings

Investment decisions are based on thorough local needs analysis and play audits

6.7 All of the Play Builder local authorities conducted audits of available play spaces in their areas before the sites were selected for Play Builder investment. Some audits were conducted in preparation for bids to BIG, others predated both BIG and Play Builders, but both programmes accelerated and enhanced the development of sites previously identified for refurbishment using other funding, principally from the local authority or Section 106 (S106) agreements.

6.8 As with Play Pathfinders, Play Builder county councils relied on audits conducted by district councils. Some audits were more sophisticated than others, drawing on external standards and criteria for ranking the play value of sites and areas in greatest need of investment. While a few audits did not categorise sites at all, most used a range of measures including geographical location (to ensure fair distribution for the investment, particularly in large counties), standard NEEP/LEAP classifications (i.e. travel distance/time, proximity to local housing, age ranges, size of site, equipment on the site), ROSPA safety criteria and Play England guidance for assessing play value.

6.9 Some audits provided the only evidence local authorities used in site selection, whilst other local authorities consulted widely with local communities and schools about satisfaction with play areas. Upper-tier authorities involved district, borough and parish councils in these consultations. A few local authorities commissioned external consultants to visit and score play areas using Play England indicators, and in one case such scores provided an independent assessment of play value with which the local authority could respond to local lobbying and also establish a baseline for future evaluations. Several local authorities mentioned their Open Space strategy when identifying play sites for development, and some had already identified sites for development with BIG funding. It is clear that in many cases BIG funding was used to carry out development before the Play Builder programme began.

6.10 Some local authorities noted differences between site selection in years 1 and 2 of the Play Builder programme, whilst others reported no significant differences, and simply started on a long list of sites in Year 1 and completed it in Year 2. Elsewhere easier sites to develop (e.g. not requiring planning permission, or facing

opposition from local residents) were developed in Year 1, whilst more challenging and strategically important sites were left for Year 2 when more time was available. The difference in delivery timescales for the two years (just six months in the first year, a year in the second) was cited by several local authorities as making a big difference to site selection. Some conducted additional consultations with local communities and schools to narrow down the sites selected for development in Year 2.

6.11 What seemed to work best was to audit existing play sites and then consult communities to identify local needs and narrow down the list of sites for development, rather than inviting open suggestions for sites to be developed or making an open call for funding applications. Typically, upper-tier authorities administering Play Builder funding invited bids from district and parish councils to develop sites based on transparent selection criteria. It was important to reduce competition for investment between areas, so bidding to develop pre-selected sites in each local area was an important part of the process.

6.12 Site selection based on objective criteria also helped local authorities respond to local interest groups, using audits of sites against pre-determined and external criteria, and in some cases commissioning independent consultants, to prioritise sites for development. Community consultations were also important for resolving disputes and residents' concerns about developing local play areas. Keeping the selection process simple, transparent and objective and communicating the results are essential.

The close involvement of children, families and communities in the design of playable space as a core part of the delivery process

6.13 The range of organisations, communities and people Play Builder local authorities and their partners consulted on the design of play spaces was similar to Play Pathfinders. Play Builders commented that effective consultation takes time, noting that considerably more time for this was available in Year 1 than in Year 2. All were clear that a primary purpose of consultation with children and families was to ensure they understood the full range of play opportunities available to them, and were not limited by previous experience of traditional play spaces. Local authorities and their partners also sought ideas from the local community, and involved local tenants' and residents' associations, in order to build a sense of local ownership and pride. Through consultation children were encouraged to think about risk and types of play they like, parents/carers to think about barriers to letting their children play out, and other site users to articulate how they use the spaces selected for development.

6.14 Groups of people consulted included children and young people, and parents/carers, residents' associations, third sector organisations, neighbourhood management teams, friends of parks (where these existed), schools and youth councils, Aiming Higher for Disabled Children teams, special schools, specialist organisations representing disabled children, and umbrella organisations for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. Topics for consultation were wide ranging, and included the needs of the area, play site design, landscaping and play equipment, access and safety issues, vandalism and maintenance, road safety and traffic, anti- social behaviour, and dogs and fencing. Beyond these topics, some local authorities tackled more controversial matters, including why investing in play spaces is not a waste of money, delivering children's exciting ideas for local play in sites that can be managed and maintained, balancing councillors' concerns about litigation with play workers' interest in risky and challenging play, and challenging residents' hostility to children playing outside near where they live.

6.15 As with the Play Pathfinders, a wide range of consultation methods were deployed by the Play Builder local authorities, including some exciting and effective approaches involving children. Children were engaged through inclusive games in schools and also visits to play sites selected for development, sometimes visiting other developed sites to see what is possible. Local authorities and their partners worked with children in schools and on school councils, at community events and open meetings, in play and youth clubs, and during outdoor play sessions run by play rangers and development workers. In some cases children and young people worked closely with architects and play workers on site designs and build stages, sometimes through facilitated play activities, in advisory and even commissioning roles. Play Builder local authorities also held meetings with parents/carers and other local residents, conducted surveys and leafleted neighbourhoods, and visited friends of the park groups.

6.16 When consulting children, local authorities sometimes found they did not know the play area being discussed, or had had difficulty accessing the site in its dilapidated state. Bringing photographs to consultation events involving children was found to be a simple but effective way of engaging these children. Play-based activities were particularly effective in providing children with enough time to engage with the consultation activity and contribute their ideas. Children producing lots of drawings and participating in structured face-to-face groups were found to work well, especially when these activities were located in the play space to be developed. Involving specialists in child consultation was also effective: Play Builders mentioned working with Action for Children, Barnardos, Groundwork, KIDs and local voluntary organisations. And putting children in charge, treating them as commissioners of play spaces and working with children's fora, was found to be a very effective way of empowering them to contribute their ideas.

Play areas are stimulating, exciting and attractive to children by ensuring high quality, innovative design and procurement by local authorities and their delivery partners locally

6.17 Play Builders faced a number of challenges in their attempts to develop high-quality innovative designs for their play sites. Some parents/carers had difficulty conceptualising innovative designs as creating suitable spaces for play, even when their children expressed a clear preference for the exciting play experiences such designs afford. At some sites developed with Play Builder funding there were complaints from parents who expected to see traditional play equipment, and who could not understand how their children would play in these spaces. There have also been challenges from the police, who in some cases have delayed development or attempted to influence design (e.g. fencing an area) to reduce anti- social behaviour. Several local authorities said the Play Builder programme had helped to tackle these barriers by raising awareness of the benefits of high-quality and innovative designs for enabling play.

6.18 It is clear that the short timescales in Year 1 placed considerable pressure on local authority procurement processes and constrained high-quality and innovative design. Single-step procurement (e.g. for design, landscaping, equipment, and building) was more common in Year 1 than in Year 2, when more time was available for developing creative design solutions in line with Play England guidance. The two-step procurement process allowed landscape and site designs to form the basis of second-stage procurement for building and equipment supply. Single-step procurement reduces cost and time, and has been found to be easier to operate through standard local authority procurement processes, including established panels of equipment suppliers. Yet the results can be less innovative than those resulting from the iteration between design and build phases afforded by two-step procurement processes. Play Builders were more likely to refer to guidance for developing high-quality and innovative designs based in Play England guidance during two-step procurement processes.

Play areas are attractive to boys and girls and inclusive of minority ethnic groups and disabled children

6.19 Play Builder local authorities went to great lengths to ensure the developed play areas are attractive and inclusive of a wide range of different children's needs. Extensive consultation with children in the eight to 13 age range was reported to make the consultations on site design as inclusive as possible. Consultation with BME groups, and also with representative organisations for children with disabilities in local areas, were conducted. Most local authorities aimed to develop play areas

which would be attractive and accessible to all rather than target specific groups of children, and some chose unisex equipment deliberately.

6.20 One Play Builder found that some specialist play equipment for disabled children was not suitable for outdoor use. Another argued that a balance needed to be struck between targeted and universal provision within quite small site budgets (averaging £50,000). Others involved disabilities specialists during the design phase, drew up accessibility checklists or undertook equality impact assessments to ensure disability inclusivity. In some cases disabled children were invited to visit sites during the build phase to highlight specific access issues.

6.21 Some resistance to the idea of gender differences in play was observed during the consultations. Most Play Builders aimed to meet the needs of all children by providing a wide variety of play opportunities, and all emphasised the importance of consulting boys and girls including children from BME communities (working through schools is an effective way of doing this). Several mentioned creating play opportunities targeting girls (including quiet seating areas, social activities and role playing), and some commissioned specialist VCS organisations to consult children from BME communities. However most regarded variety in universal provision rather than specialist equipment targeting particular groups as the best approach for ensuring inclusive play spaces meet all children's needs.

Play areas are developed alongside measures to improve safety of children both on their way to, and at, play opportunities locally

6.22 Most local authorities sought external advice to ensure the safety of children travelling to and playing within play areas developed with Play Builder funding. External advice included published guidance (*Inclusion by Design* (CABE, November 2008) and Play England guidance in particular) and VCS organisations and charities (e.g. Play England, Groundwork, Action for Children, Play Link, Children's Links, Playing Fields Association). Only a few Play Builder local authorities considered they had sufficient internal specialist expertise not to need any external advice.

6.23 Few Play Builder local authorities regarded improving the safety of children on their way to local play areas as a priority, mainly because most Play Builder sites selected for development already existed and were accessible. Even so, several linked the refurbishment of these sites with other initiatives to improve safer travel for children, including school and cycle routes, zebra crossings, home zones and other traffic calming measures around the sites. In rural areas, widely dispersed play areas present a considerable barrier to safe access for children living too far away to walk or cycle without crossing dangerous roads. Here paths were cleared on safe routes to play areas and fences erected to keep children away from busy

roads, and children received travel safety training and encouragement to use public transport.

6.24 Improving safety at play areas developed with Play Builder funding was a priority for most Play Builder local authorities. They demonstrated good awareness of the need to weigh the risks presented by innovative landscape design and equipment play features with their play value, in line with guidance from Play England. Steps taken to improve on-site safety by most local authorities included the following: comprehensive risk registers logged on local authorities' risk management databases; weekly safety inspections and annual independent site inspections; play management software (e.g. PlaySafe) to manage inspection reports; health and safety audits using ROSPA criteria before opening refurbished sites; and installing self-closing gates to prevent children running out onto busy roads. Other measures adopted by fewer local authorities included informing parents of the benefits of the innovative play environments created with Play Builder funding, establishing awareness-raising 'bully-free zones' around play areas, and training maintenance workers using ROSPA materials.

Local authorities develop top-tier strategic approaches to play that are fully linked to their wider strategic planning

6.25 Many, but not all, Play Builder local authorities consulted during the case studies had established strong links with internal local authority departments in order to secure wider strategic commitment to play. Strategic and operational management for the Play Builder programme varied enormously between local authorities. They presented evidence showing how play has been linked to other services spanning children and young people, parks and leisure, transport and highways, environmental management and other local authority directorates. Links to wider strategic planning within the local authority were strongest when strategic and operational management functions were delivered by separate bodies with clear reporting responsibilities; when strategic management fora were attended by senior officials and elected members; and when core functions were retained within the local authority rather than outsourced.

6.26 The different arrangements for linking play with wider strategic planning at each of the case study local authorities in 2009 are detailed below.[43]

Bolton

6.27 Play sits across Children's Services (play provision) and Environment (play areas). The Play Builder project manager is based in Environmental Services. The Project Management Team comprises sports and asset management, play development,

[43] Because it is impossible to say whether these arrangements are still in place in March 2011, the evidence is reported here as it was presented to us in June and July 2009.

landscape design and regeneration. There is also a Positive Contributions Subgroup, chaired by an Assistant Director from Children's Services with links to top-tier decision makers, and a Joint Working Group (JWG) which ensures cross-departmental working. The JWG comprises representatives from play development, landscape design, planning, road safety, community engagement, highways and transport planning, community safety, parks management, streetscene, policy and performance. It reports to the Children's Trust, and the project manager reports to the Cleaner Greener Programme Board and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). The Children's Trust and LSP facilitate links between play and neighbourhood management, the Primary Care Trust (PCT), community safety and the third sector.

Bury

6.28 Play sits within the Childcare and Extended Services Department. The Play Partnership is the operational and strategic body into which a decision-making project management group reports. Parks and Countryside play a significant role, as does Play England 'on a day-to-day basis'. Other external stakeholders include the PCT and KIDS, who reviewed the accessibility of Play Builder sites at design stage, and VCS organisations. A local Housing Association supported project management and consultation activity as well as post-completion maintenance, and PCSOs were involved in consultation and delivery, and helping to secure post-completion community ownership. All stakeholders were engaged through the Play Partnership.

Calderdale

6.29 Play lies across three directorates: Community Services (parks), Children and Young People's Services (CYP, play services), and Planning Services (building). Parks in Community Services leads the Play Builder, but will be replaced by a new Play Manager from CYP services who will lead both the Play Builder and BIG play projects. The Play Partnership meets quarterly and provides strategic direction, but it is also the operational group responsible for overseeing all aspects of children's play. It is supported by an officers' group, and has representatives from community services (parks), designers (from neighbouring Kirklees Council), CYP services, planning, countryside, community safety, the Calderdale Community Forum, the Parents and Carers Council (representing disabled CYP), and an education charity. There is also an elected members' working party on play services, which is recognised to be vitally important for the future of play in Calderdale. Key stakeholders include community groups to develop and manage community play spaces (e.g. toddler groups), the police, community wardens, parks department, community safety, VCS groups, housing associations, schools and museums (for play-based informal learning). The Play Builder was thought to have

influenced the strategic aims of the parks department, where it has 'brought play back into Calderdale's recreation grounds'.

Coventry

6.30 Play is located within the Children, Learning and Young People Directorate (CLYP), but outdoor play areas are managed by Parks within Culture Leisure and Libraries (CLL). The play strategy manager within CLYP reports from the Play Builder project team (comprising play strategy manager (for CLYP), parks development manager (for CLL), project manager from the Project Champions Team (with links to procurement) to the Play Strategy Board (the strategic group), which has a City-wide Advisory Group and coordinates the work of area- based project teams.) The project team membership was reduced to the core required for effective cross-departmental working. The Advisory group includes police, neighbourhood management, city services, and a play inspector. The Coventry Play Strategy Board includes heads of service for strategic services (CLYP), CLL, planning and transport, and also the executive director of the Groundwork Trust in Coventry and Warwickshire, as well as managers from neighbourhoods, policy development, grounds maintenance, health and safety, and the Play Champion councillor. Internal stakeholders include the parks department, city services (maintenance and inspection), CLYP directorate, and neighbourhood management. External stakeholders vary by site, but generally include police, Play England, schools and community organisations. Difficulties were reported engaging the PCT, and involving schools has proven to be a challenge. No evidence was presented that the Play Builder has influenced the delivery, spending or strategic plans of other council departments or other mainstream service providers, apart from making proposals for supplementary planning guidance: 'people are waiting to see whether it works.'

Nottinghamshire

6.31 Play sits in the Early Years and Childcare Service within CYP Services. Play Builder funding has increased the focus on community play development. A county-wide steering group oversees strategy and also operational delivery, with members including councillors, officers, highways and planning, the Rural Community Council and Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire. Seven district-level local Play Partnerships also support the delivery of community play events, working with county and district council leisure officers and play champion councillors. Wider stakeholders vary between districts, but include PCTs, cultural services, district play fora, residents' associations and Sure Start centres. Within the County Council, CYP sub-groups of the LSPs have requested formal updates on Play Builder progress, the Aiming High for Disabled children has taken a keen interest, the Extended Services Strategic Planning Group has expressed support,

and community involvement workers have supported District Play Partnerships. Play partnerships have facilitated engagement with stakeholders, and agreed sites for development identified in the Play Strategy, involving residents associations, neighbourhood management meetings, community development meetings, and health partnership meetings. Play is now recognised for its contribution to the tackling obesity strategy, and it has raised awareness of bullying, emotional health and wellbeing. Play development work now features in District Council service plans.

Solihull

6.32 Play sits within Education and Children's Services and Community Services (including Transport, Highways and Environment). Open access and after school play are managed by the Extended Schools team, and play rangers are managed by the Places Directorate. The play development team based in Extended Schools also manage the adventure playground and work with the play ranger team. The Play Builder Working Group oversees operational management, with a membership including the two Play Builder project managers, a grounds and maintenance manager, the head park ranger, the local councillor representing green spaces, a play worker specialising in disabilities, and another play worker. Officers from cultural services, community safety and transport and highways are regularly briefed. The Strategic Project Board is chaired by the Director for Commissioning, and members include the commissioning officer for the Children's Trust, a Senior Streetcare Manager, a procurement officer, and a Building Schools for the Future senior manager. The Commissioning Officer for Children's Services is the lead officer/director for the Play Builder, and links the Strategic Project Board to the Play Partnership and the Play Working Group. The Play Builder therefore has good strategic links at the highest levels within the local authority.

Somerset

6.33 Play sits within the Children and Young People's Directorate, but play services are outsourced to Barnardos. A Barnardos project worker is project manager for the Play Builder, reporting to a more senior children's services manager within Barnardos. Both are members of the Play Builder Executive Group, where strategic and operational decisions are made, alongside a County finance officer and a senior manager for the County CYP directorate, play leads from the five districts and a representative from Play England. Others involved in day-to-day delivery include parish councils, schools, recreation field management committees and friends of the park groups (where these exist). District-level Play Partnerships set up to bid for BIG funding have since disbanded now the funding has stopped.

There is a county-wide Play Forum comprising 20-30 members meeting quarterly and an annual conference for 200 people.

Southampton

6.34 Play is based within Youth and Community Support but much of play delivery is outsourced to Groundwork Solent. Operational management is through the Play Taskforce, chaired by Groundwork and including housing and open spaces departments and a head teacher. Groundwork has been commissioned to deliver play audits, the consultations, some design work and the local evaluation. The Play Builder programme at Southampton does not have a strategic board: everything is done through the Play Taskforce comprising local authority officers where few external public service providers attend meetings. Groundwork chairs the Taskforce, delivers aspects of the programme and evaluates the results.

Tameside

6.35 Play team sits within Children's Services. The Tameside Play Strategy was developed in 2006 by the Tameside Children and Young People Strategic Partnership. The Play Partnership is chaired by the play manager and provides oversight of operations. It includes representatives with operational experience from extended services, the voluntary council, registered social landlords, play workers, youth services, district assemblies, sport development and community development. The Tameside Play Strategy Group is the strategic steering group, with overlapping membership to the Play Partnership in some cases. The Strategy Group is chaired by the Director of Children's Services and has representatives from Play England, the voluntary council, RSLs, play workers, Youth Services, District assemblies and sports development. It provides links to 'higher-level individuals' within these organisations. The main stakeholders for the Play Builder programme within the local authority include district assemblies and town councils, the community development and sports development teams, and external stakeholders including Action for Children and RSLs. They were engaged before the Play Builder programme began.

Thurrock

6.36 Play sits within Children's Services, specifically within the Children, Youth and Families Section, but responsibility for play site maintenance lies with Environment. There is no formal operational project steering group as such, but the Play Builder project manager and sustainable communities' manager work closely with the Play Partnership, which provides strategic direction as a formal sub-group of the Children's Trust Board. The Play Partnership includes the Play Builder project manager and sustainable communities' manager, the play champion

councillor, police, the PCT, a VCS delivery organisation, and other VCS organisations.

Local councils work to boost the qualifications and skills of the play workforce, and support volunteer schemes to enable adults and young people to help support local play

6.37 The Play Builder local authorities regarded this to be predominantly a capital programme with little impact on staffing arrangements for the play workforce. They did not comment on workforce qualifications or skills, and offered very little evidence of volunteer involvement in the supervision of children getting to and from play sites or enabling play within these sites. Beyond consulting friends of the park groups and engaging VCS organisations for specialist advice, there is little evidence that Play Builder local authorities supported volunteer schemes to support local play.

What difference has Play Builder made?

6.38 It is clear that local authorities play provision received funding from more than just the Play Builder programme, principally from local authority sources, BIG grants and S106 agreements. Play Builder local authorities also said that play sites needing development had already been identified during previous play provision audits, principally in preparation for BIG bids. However it is also clear that Play Builder funding ensured these developments happened much more quickly, and to a higher standard of play value with more innovative design and features, than otherwise would have been the case. As the following examples illustrate, in many cases play areas developed through the Play Builder programme simply would not have gone ahead without the funding.

- *Bolton* – About half the total play budget would have been available without Play Builder funding, but only a third of the whole play programme would have been delivered.
- *Bury* – Almost none of the developments in the selected sites would have gone ahead without Play Builder funding.
- *Calderdale* – Play Builder funding has helped officers to communicate ideas and educate people about the importance of play, raising its profile locally and changing attitudes. Local authority funding, BIG funding and S106 funding would all have been available without Play Builder, but S106 has been dropping off during the housing crisis.
- *Nottinghamshire* – Play Builder funding has been used to leverage S106 funding, but this funding would have been available without Play Builder.

However the play spaces selected and developed with Play Builder funding would not have gone ahead.

- *Solihull* – Many sites had become very unsafe and would have been decommissioned without Play Builder funding. About 40% of play equipment had come to the end of its life and would not otherwise have been replaced. It would not have possible to consult CYP or design landscaping without Play Builder funding.
- *Somerset* – Leveraged BIG and S106 funding would have been available without Play Builder funding, but Play Builder has ensured more innovative and exciting play spaces were created. Moreover, S106 funding would not have been released so quickly without Play Builder funding to match. Without Play Builder the sites would have been smaller, less innovative and less exciting, and some would not have been developed at all.
- *Southampton* – Some of the selected site developments would have gone ahead without Play Builder funding but on a smaller scale.
- *Tameside* – The play spaces selected for development would not have been developed without Play Builder funding.
- *Thurrock* – Play Builder funding has been used to support a bid for further BIG funding and an Open Spaces grant, and S106 funding for play areas would have been smaller without Play Builder funding. It is very unlikely that the selected sites would have been developed without Play Builder funding because there was no money to undertake the work.

This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.