

Developing Accessible Play Space in the UK: A Social Model Approach¹

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Comment on This Field Report

Abstract

In 2003, the UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) commissioned a non-statutory good practice guide on accessible play space. Developing Accessible Play Space: A Good Practice Guide published by ODPM in November 2003, gives advice which can be tailored to individual settings on developing accessible play space disabled children can use. This paper describes the research conducted to inform development of the Guide. Key objectives of the research undertaken were to review current practice relating to accessible play space for disabled children and to advise play space providers on improving accessibility. The approach taken to this project was based on the social model of disability that focuses on the barriers encountered by people viewed as having impairments. This approach encourages play space providers to concentrate on dismantling barriers that create segregation, exclusion and disablement rather than worrying about the complexities of impairment.

Keywords: [playgrounds](#), [accessibility](#), [children with disabilities](#)

Background

Until recently, there has been little recognition of disabled children's entitlement to the same opportunities for development through play as other children. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to their interests when planning and designing public play spaces. In the UK, since 1996, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) has made it unlawful for service providers to treat disabled people less favourably and increasingly "reasonable adjustments" are being required which give legislative effect to the drive to make open public play spaces fully accessible. Notwithstanding the legal and human rights context that situates this work, where children play in their local communities, and how they can be supported to play safely in public spaces, is of concern to children and young people as well as to Government and parents. Improving access to public play spaces for disabled children and other groups who currently under use them is central to the development of sustainable and inclusive communities (ODPM 2003).

Feeling included as a child through experiences acquired in your local community gives a sense of belonging and self worth which later influences attitudes towards participation and citizenship (Swain et al. 2003). Many disabled children go to schools away from their own neighbourhood and so using local play space may provide the only opportunity to develop friendships with other local children and therefore to build and foster community identity. Moreover, enabling disabled children to access play spaces helps them and their families build relationships and neighbourhood networks that can bind communities and promote social inclusion. When children play together, parents invariably talk together and new community alliances are forged.

Objectives

The objectives of the research we undertook were to:

- assess current advice and guidance to play space providers and review current practice relating to accessible play space for disabled children;
- clarify the existing and possibly conflicting legislative and regulatory frameworks that are relevant to the provision of play spaces;
- consider other relevant policies and initiatives;
- develop a good practice guide for play space providers, including practical advice on improving accessibility.

It was envisaged that the guide would help to explain current and future duties under the access provisions in Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA 1995) in relation to the provision of play spaces.

It was established that the guide would reflect the views of disabled children and their families as well as feedback from the play sector. In addition, it would make reference to wider access issues, such as travel and toilets. It would be aimed at play space providers, which are mainly local authorities and town and parish councils, but also include developers, housing associations and open space trusts in its remit. It was acknowledged that the guide may also be relevant to other groups and organisations working to create or improve play space provision.

Approach

The approach taken was based on the social model of disability which provides a way of understanding and responding to exclusions and oppressions experienced by disabled children and young people and their families. It emerged in the 1970s as disabled people struggled to understand their own situations, to define their own problems and to develop their own aspirations for change. It is based on the idea that:

It is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.

- Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation 1976

Social model thinking increasingly underpins the work of the British Government initiated Disability Rights Commission (Barnes 2003). It involves focussing on nothing more complicated than the barriers encountered by people viewed as having impairments and enables play space providers to take a creative approach to dismantling barriers that create segregation, exclusion and disablement rather than worrying about questions of impairment.

When working to understand and remove the disabling barriers that people with impairments face, a premiss of consultation is a key. For this reason, a broad consultation informed the development of the guide, including consultation with disabled children and their families. The manner in which disabled and non-disabled children are brought into consultation with agencies working to support them is crucial. Recent shifts in policy direction towards consulting with and maximising the participation of children in planning for the services and facilities they use is important to bear in mind. For this reason we have attached considerable importance to placing disabled children at the heart of the consultation and making their views and experiences of play space a key reference point for all other stakeholders. In practice this has meant that we have taken disabled children's views on accessible play space first and then put these to other groups of key stakeholders to see where consensus could be reached to work towards meeting children's aspirations. We have aimed to show through our own research practice ways in which consultation with disabled children will assist the development of accessible play space. This approach reflects our endorsement of the citizenship approach identified by Oliver and Bailey (2002) that calls for consultation with disabled children to be the starting point for development of their services.

Review of Literature

It is widely acknowledged that play has developmental and therapeutic benefits to children and that it is crucial to a child's development on every level (Cole-Hamilton et al 2002; Dunn 2001). Play is what children do when not being directed by adults. It is a natural part of their daily life and healthy development and impairment does not reduce the child's capacity or desire for play opportunities as Heseltine and Hicks (2001) have pointed out:

Being disabled does not reduce personal vigour or remove any inherent sense of adventure. The aspiration of those providing play facilities must be to create challenges for all and barriers for none.

Heseltine and Hicks 2001

Cole-Hamilton et al (2002) carried out extensive research to gather evidence on children's play, covering a total of 14,000 children and young people between the ages of five and sixteen. The strongest message to emerge from this research was that children and young people want to spend more of their free and playing time outside. Outdoor play offers children many unique developmental opportunities (Wood 2001). It plays a part in reducing the long-term health consequences of a sedentary lifestyle as well as potentially facilitating the learning of key social, emotional and life skills. The more diverse the natural and physical surroundings, the greater the range of learning and developmental opportunities.

Huttenmoser and Degen-Zimmerman (1995) reported that young children who were not in the habit of playing outside their homes with their friends were restricted in their social relationships, were less able to occupy themselves and were more likely to watch television in their free time, than those children who played out in the street or near their homes in parks. This study showed that good play provision can facilitate good community relations as parents whose children play together come to know their neighbours thus adding to the "social capital" of a neighbourhood. Accessible play space extends these possibilities for social inclusion to disabled children and their families. When children are deprived of opportunities to play detrimental effects on their learning, health and development are inescapable (Brown 2003; Hughes 2001).

Heseltine and Hicks (2001) point out that "accessible play" and "inclusive play" are not the same things. Removing environmental barriers helps make play spaces accessible, whilst social barriers have to be dealt with to make them inclusive. In addition to this, inclusive play does not focus on particular needs:

inclusive play is not about meeting 'special needs' it's about meeting all children's needs in the same place and in a variety of way (Douche 2002).

Central to any discussion on accessible play space, is the body of literature associated with risk and safety. Within this literature, issues of best value inevitably surface and consultation is once again found to be vital. Risk is, of course, an integral element to play (Play Safety Forum 2002). Children playing outdoors are certain to encounter physical, psychological and social challenges. As they do so they learn through experience, how to look after themselves and how to react and behave in different situations. Learning to confront difficult situations and test boundaries through the experience of play benefits all children. If disabled children are prevented from learning how to understand and manage risk it is arguable they will be disadvantaged in terms of social development.

The literature asserts that disabled children are entitled to encounter risk and this offers them many benefits:

All children both need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, venture into new experiences and develop their capacities, from a very young age and from their earliest play experiences. ... Children with disabilities have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take

risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers.

- Managing Risk in Play Provision (Play Safety Forum 2002)

It is important to recognise that in the UK play spaces are not generally dangerous places for children to use. A position statement from The Play Safety Forum, a grouping of national agencies involved in play safety, makes the point that of the two million childhood accident cases treated in the UK annually, less than 2 percent of these injuries were sustained using playground equipment. It points out that participation in sports involve a much greater level of risk than outdoor play, which is generally deemed to be acceptable.

In *Developing the Children's Playground*, Heseltine (2001) provides specific guidance on the selection of equipment and the impact this has on risk and safety. Although recommendations are not specifically targeted towards disabled children they are equally valid to this group as to their non-disabled peers. Similarly, Potter (2001) in *Playground Management and Safety* usefully outlines safety management systems for play spaces providing detail on technical aspects such as siting, drainage, parking, choice of surfaces and equipment. Potter pays specific attention to types of equipment suitable and safe for use by disabled children and draws attention to the fact that disabled parents and carers must also be able to access play spaces if their children are to play in them. Generally, this literature agrees that risk assessment strategies are essential. Safety features enhance access to play spaces and improved access promotes inclusion:

The aim in play setting is to provide for play, not provide for safety. Safety is an issue only where the nature of the physical environment might threaten a child's ability to play freely without coming to harm. As such, safety is a consideration in the planning, design and management of the play environment. It is extremely important but it is not the only or the first consideration.

- Melville 1997

Universally there is no code of practice, set of procedures or checklist of dimensions that can guarantee safety. A child's safety at play within play provision is the result of a balancing act between the responsibility to foster children's development and pleasure and the responsibility to ensure children do not come to harm. The balancing act requires constant exercise of personal and professional judgment, monitoring and response. It is one of the dynamics of creative and thriving play provision.

Research Methods

Telephone Interviews with Playground Amenity Officers

We conducted a series of telephone interviews to collect data from a geographically scattered sample of 40 local authority workers (for example, Playground amenity officers, Parks, Landscape & Leisure Managers, Senior Parks Services Officers and Planners) selected from across the regions of England. The purpose of telephone interviews was to: assess current practice on accessible play space provision and identify a range of best practice projects from around England; enable key providers to identify existing—and possibly conflicting—

legislative frameworks which impact on the provision of accessible play space and to familiarise playground amenities officers with the aims of the project and forthcoming good practice guide.

Stakeholder Workshops

We took stock of the perspectives of key stakeholder groups with an interest in developing good practice guidance on accessible play space for disabled children. These were disabled children, their families and friends, Campaign Groups, Policy makers, Playground Amenities Officers, Equipment manufacturers, Planners and Good practice representatives (those involved in the successful development of accessible play spaces already established in England).

Consulting Disabled Children, Their Families and Friends

Creative thinking is always required to maximise consultation with disabled children and their parents. Families with complex commitments may find it difficult to prioritise attendance at evening meetings, complete questionnaires or participate in protracted discussions. In view of this we sought to develop consultation strategies that would fit in with ordinary family life and not take up too much hard-pressed time.

Fifty eight families with disabled children were identified through a range of agencies either run by, or tasked with supporting them. These included national and local support groups, care-giver networks and social groups, some of which agreed to encourage participation through their meetings and newsletters. We invited disabled children and their families to consultation events to be held in public open play spaces. Our aim was to talk with and observe disabled children, their brothers, sisters, friends and parents playing together. Not all disabled children can (or want to) talk about their experiences and so disposable cameras were given to children and families to record their experience and the researchers watched children play and played with them.

At each consultation event children and families spent time looking at pictures of play spaces and talking about their experience of going to them. These conversations were taped and any drawings or writing collected. Children were given folders with activities to take home and work on in their own time. Stamped addressed envelopes were provided to encourage them to send their work back. A week later, participants were invited back to the same play space to look at their photographs and to comment on them. Once again information was picked up in a variety of ways children and parents talked, told stories, drew pictures, and played in the play space. The events were written up and summaries sent out to participating families for comments prior to feeding our sense of the data into the wider research process.

Consulting Other Stakeholder Groups

Representatives of all of the other stakeholder groups were invited from across the regions of England to participate in workshops facilitated by the Project Team. The aim of each workshop—typically involving some 30 participants—was to review and evaluate aspirations for a good practice guide on accessible play space from a specific stakeholder perspective. The purpose of these events was to establish baseline data, allow a “taking stock” of each group's point of view and facilitate a sharing of ideas for a good practice guide. The aims of the information gathering exercises were to encourage stakeholders to self assess,

in broad terms, ways in which public open play spaces should be accessible to disabled children and to examine expectations and preferences with regard to a good practice guide. An initial working document was produced following each workshop, reviewing the perspectives contributed. Once the document was agreed to provide a fair and accurate account of the issues aired, it was disseminated to other stakeholders—enabling each of the different stakeholder groups to gain insight into the perspectives of others.

Consultation with Mix of Stakeholders

Matters arising from the documents presenting preliminary findings were shared and reviewed through a “Mixed Group Workshop.” For this data gathering session representatives from each Stakeholder Group were invited to come together to discuss key issues. A minimum of four representatives from each stakeholder group took part in this exercise. This workshop allowed for cross fertilisation of responses to the findings from the workshops and for ideas to be shared across the focal stakeholder domains on the content and format of the good practice guide. The aims of the Mixed Group Workshop were to continue work with key stakeholders to utilise data collected via participation in the workshops to build on self-assessment, demonstrate effective consultation and further develop ideas for good practice. Our objective was to develop a draft of the good practice guide based on the emergent and collective priorities of participant stakeholders. The workshop was also intended to ensure that those who had taken part in the research process were supported in their capacity to respond to what they had learned from each other.

Key Findings and Analysis

Summary Analysis of Results of Telephone Interviews

Data collected through telephone interviews provided a mapping of the perspectives of amenity officers on current practice, familiar difficulties and best practice underway. It emerged that specific policy statements on accessible play space for disabled children are relatively thin on the ground in the UK. Most respondents indicated uncertainty about policy on accessible play space or were aware of only limited development in this area. In some areas policy was said to be in the process of being developed to address the requirements of the DDA. Some weaknesses of current policy frameworks on accessible play space were identified where, for example, policy only covers new play areas not existing ones, does not adequately take into account the needs of local communities, is not backed up by money for play provision, or the “policy” is not formalised. Initiatives to develop future policy vary and there is a gap between reports of “nothing at this stage” and specific development, for example, “strong policy, backing of right people, evidence from reports.” In the UK support for rolling out of policy on accessible play space is variable, but most of those who took part in a telephone interview were aware of ongoing initiatives to develop policy for open and accessible public play spaces. The DDA is described as the key driver of these developments.

Respondents made clear that accessible play space provision does not focus specifically on access for children with impairments. It may be that this is because access issues are seen as transcending the requirements of disabled children as a segregated group—in which case this trend is indicative of the strongest commitment to advancing the project of inclusion. On the other hand,

it may be that children with impairments are not centrally placed in thinking about accessible play space provision. Nevertheless, the snapshot provided by the telephone interviews on accessible play space development does show some impressive responses:

We don't differentiate between users—all sites have to be and are accessible as much as possible—since 1994 there has been a great degree of accessibility for everyone.

- Playground Amenities Officer

Not everyone interviewed knew of good practice on accessible play space in their area, but frequently respondents could point to good practice examples they knew of in other locations. Good practice on making use of accessible equipment and enhancing safety features to assist access is more familiar. Good practice in thinking around issues for disabled children and their families was evident where officers referenced the importance of ensuring access to play spaces for disabled parents as well as children or the provision of seating for caregivers accompanying children with impairments in play spaces. This suggests attention is being paid to thinking about the dismantling of barriers that create social exclusion over and above those which impede children with impairments by some amenity officers.

Respondents expressed commitment to prioritising the aspirations of disabled children and young people, their families and their representative agencies in the development of accessible play space. A few interviewees were aware of a programme within their local authority for professional development relating to the development of accessible play spaces for disabled children and more had attended external training events. Most described themselves as inexperienced with regards to accessible play space matters and felt more training and information, particularly if informed by disabled people, would be advantageous. Equipment manufacturers are known to be making some input into training for those seeking to develop accessible play space.

Resources were commonly identified as a key inhibitor of accessible play space development and funding for play space development typically described as “hard to come by.” Other commonly mentioned obstacles to developing good accessible play space identified include: limited or unsuitable sites available for a play space, British and European safety standards which are perceived as ambiguous, Lack of knowledge on disability issues sometimes means accessible play space development is neglected. Most of those interviewed said they did not have enough knowledge about the DDA to develop accessible play space with confidence. In part this was understood to be because the DDA remains untested in the courts and thus its full ramifications are unknown.

Summary Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives

What can be seen from our analysis of the data collected from various stakeholder groups is that key themes emerge, albeit often with different emphasis. Sometimes these present as consensus or as debate that is constructively underway between groups. At other times they reveal conflicts and possible tensions between different groups and in relation to constraints groups experience. Discussion of the data provided by each stakeholder group is based around the following themes:

- understanding disability
- benefits of improved accessibility
- planning
- consultation
- safety issues
- design and environment
- funding matters
- partnership working
- how a guide could help

Understanding Disability

Playground amenities officers, planners, manufacturers and other professionals with a role to play in developing accessible play space often feel that a lack of knowledge about the implications of particular impairments inhibits their ability to develop accessible play space. They feel they need to know more about impairments before they can effectively develop provision for disabled children. This view is in sharp contrast with the way in which disabled children, their families and their representative campaign groups we spoke to look at things. Families with disabled children and campaign groups wish play providers to shift their focus away from trying to make sense of “the problems” that impairments are presumed to cause to children and young people and to concentrate instead on removing the social and environmental barriers that lead to segregation, exclusion and disablement. Campaign group representatives point out that this view, which is at the heart of “the social model of disability”, helps those involved in developing accessible play space to think beyond the functional limitations of an individual child or young person and to look more creatively instead at ways of circumventing the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures:

Disability occurs because of the way we design the environment. It's not a given. Children have impairments, but disability is a moveable thing depending on how environments are designed and what people's attitudes are.

- Campaign group representative

2.20 Campaign groups know that disabled children and young people currently miss out from supposedly inclusive and accessible provision because they have impairments regarded by play space providers as “too complex.” They are sure that the social model of disability holds the key to fresh thinking on this matter:

Anything that promotes an understanding of the social model—that changes hearts and minds and gets people to question initial assumptions about disability is crucial. Otherwise it's 'let's create an environment for children and then try and include the ones we've excluded to start with. Campaign Group representative

Campaign groups realise that the long history of segregation of disabled children and young people in England has rendered their entitlements invisible to many service providers and the confidence of staff to engage with issues concerning impairment and disablement is consequently often low. Training for key

providers, including disability equality training, is felt to be key to the development of good open accessible play space.

Playground amenities officers say they find it useful to think about disability as what a child experiences if they encounter disabling attitudes and disabling environments. This approach to thinking about disabled children's access to play enables providers to concentrate on questions of "what are the barriers to play for any child who might wish to access a play space and how can those barriers be dismantled?" Good practice guidance on accessible play space can then be interpreted as about ways of making play spaces open and accessible to *all* children.

During the course of the consultation, those with a role to play in developing accessible play space increasingly came to regard the job of developing accessible play space as about recognising the ordinariness of disabled children and accepting the ordinariness of their entitlement to play. Promoters of current good practice in accessible play argue no child or family should ever find they can not access a public play space.

Benefits of Improved Accessibility

Disabled children, their families and their representative campaign groups are clear that inclusion is the major benefit to be derived from making playspace accessible. For these groups, accessible play space development is connected to the rights of all disabled children and their families to inclusion in public places. They assert that inclusion is not the same as access and that whilst good practice guidance on accessible play space may physically facilitate disabled children wanting to access play settings, it will not necessarily follow that they can or will be included in play and social opportunities within the play space. An important first step towards making play spaces inclusive will be taken by making them accessible but the removal of physical barriers (enabling access) must be intimately concerned with the removal of social barriers (encouraging inclusion). Disabled children and their families point out that accessible public play spaces offer a unique opportunity for the building of children's relationships. Many disabled children and young people attend schools outside of their neighbourhood and visits to playgrounds provide a way of cementing their presence in the community.

All of the children and young people who took part in this consultation were clear that they want to enjoy access to play spaces. Disabled children feel it is important that they have access to open accessible play space in which they will not be laughed at, rejected or made fun of, but included as ordinary children. Brothers and sisters of disabled children express sadness and discomfort at exclusion of their brothers and sisters from a play space. Parents of those disabled children who prefer not to play with other children still wish their children to be *entitled* to play in the same places as everyone else.

Planning

Planners who took part in this consultation feel that for effective strategic planning of accessible play space, greater understanding of green space provision, the network of green spaces and how they link together in urban and rural areas is required at local level. The process of developing formal outdoor play provision is felt to often be a matter of serendipity and where resources are scarce and best use of money is a priority, greater understanding of the issues

would mean resources could be better employed where they are most needed. The lack of children's play spaces in deprived areas is a major concern to planners, families and campaign groups who recognise that experiences for children with impairments in deprived areas may be very different from those in more prosperous areas. Planners feel many of the playgrounds and facilities in the most deprived areas of England are incapable of being regenerated and need to be started again.

The extent to which local communities are involved in planning for and developing play spaces varies considerably from area to area. What also varies is the level of community facilities planners negotiate and secure in respect of play provision from developers. In order to secure better community facilities from developers clarity is needed about who actually does the negotiating and the status this has. Planners take the view that a far more assertive approach in negotiating community facilities is going to be necessary in order to help support and develop good, accessible play spaces:

I think it's a big missed opportunity in terms of the whole of the planning Section 106 process. We could be asking for far better community facilities, in terms of direct and off-site provision. However you need a clear and robust policy framework, preferably supported by appropriate adopted supplementary planning guidance to achieve this.

- Regeneration officer

Planners stress that improving the planning process as part of the project of developing accessible play space will depend on better consultation between planners and other groups in order to improve partnership working. The timing of this consultation, and whether or not it is early enough in the development process to facilitate the best use of space and design, is central here.

Consultation

The importance of consultation with disabled children and their families is recognised by all who took part in our consultation. Campaign groups feel playground planners sometimes look too much towards physical access and not widely enough at access to the social experience of play. They assert that disabled children and their families need to identify with new accessible play space initiatives and comprise a key advisory resource vital to the success of a development project. Participation of disabled children and young people and their families in planning and implementation of accessible play space projects and then in evaluating and monitoring the play space is crucial to good practice. Campaigners and representative of good practice projects point out that creative consultation strategies need to be developed as for many families with disabled children communication may not be an easy or comfortable process. Being prepared to consult with children and young people, including those who are differently articulate, takes time and effort and involves adapting processes used with adult groups.

The importance of establishing two-way consultation processes between users and providers is stressed by those already involved in successful accessible play space projects. Setting up mutually beneficial mechanisms for the giving and receiving of advice is found to be crucial. Timing of consultation is a sensitive issue and representatives of good practice are particularly careful about not

inadvertently raising unrealistic expectations where systems are unpredictable and this could damage good will generated and the work underway. Planners and designers say good practice in accessible play space provision involves including as many people as possible in consultation about what is needed and in providing support to deliver it. Manufacturers welcome a climate of consultation and open debate on accessible play space development to avoid constant reinventing of the wheel and maximise efficient use of resources.

Safety Issues

Safety is always high on the list of priorities with regards to play space. Parents have been keen to say that making play space risk free for their disabled children is not necessarily their main concern. They wish their disabled children to encounter the risk value of play in exactly the same way as non-disabled children do. Meeting with risk is a factor of daily living that families with disabled children are used to negotiating:

Everything he does is a risk. Walking on a pavement is highly risky as he often drops with no warning and falls hard. He splits his head open 3 or 4 times a year by just walking along. It is so important to us to find safe places to play because of this. But even in safe places he is always having to take risks because he has so much energy and loves to run around. I take the decision that he just has to live with risk. Obviously, I try and minimize it as much as possible but I want him to be able to enjoy things and have a good time.

- Parent

Campaign groups lead the way in asserting that the opportunity for children to experience challenge must be accessible to everyone. Not all children need to encounter risk and challenge in the same way but the social experiences offered in the play space must be accessible to everyone:

Recognising this tension and working with it is what makes play environments as beautiful and as adventurous as they might be. Failing to recognise it and failing to build in risk, sort of running away from it, leads to rather tedious and monotonous and uninteresting play spaces.

- Campaign group representative

Manufacturers and playground amenity officers know the risk of litigation is ever-present in discussions about disabled children and young people having access to a wider range of experiences. The opportunity for adventure is seen as one of the most valuable features of an accessible play space and all stakeholder groups are keen to guard against developers being too restrictive in what they provide. Nevertheless there is concern that fear of litigation may block local authorities from thinking about accessible play space installations:

In my experience insurance companies stop a lot of local authority officers ordering anything interesting. They are terrified of getting sued and the insurers not backing them and I think that is a major problem that does need to be tackled.

- Manufacturer

Playground amenities officers are clear that risk cannot be eliminated from accessible play space for any child, including disabled and vulnerable children. A balance has to be found between accepting that all children face a degree of risk in open and accessible public play spaces and dealing with the pressures of the increasingly litigious climate in which officers work. Parents point out that through lifting and handling they frequently risk their own health and safety as they help their disabled child to access certain pieces of equipment. They and their children have first hand insights to share on how access to equipment could be made easier. Representatives from the manufacturing industry worry about how to develop accessible play space that complies with safety standards. Risk assessment, as opposed to a standard compliance approach, is felt to be a more helpful tool to the development of accessible play space.

Design and Environment

Playground Amenities Officers emphasise that good accessible play spaces need careful design. The accessibility of any given play space can be spoilt by poor detail. Campaign groups say accessible play space should be designed with flexibility in mind to suit a variety of users. According to campaign groups, children and their families are looking for accessible play space in close proximity to their homes that they can use spontaneously, in contrast with “showcase” playgrounds they might make a day trip to use. This view contrasts with that expressed by playground amenities officers who find resource constraints lead them to argue that fewer, better accessible play spaces might become the goal for some local authorities rather than broader local provision.

Playground amenities officers report that creating separate playgrounds or purchasing special equipment for disabled children leads to segregation. They have found that taking the focus away from calls for specialist equipment and facilities promotes inclusion and can make the task of developing accessible play space much more manageable. They acknowledge opportunities for making accessible play space when refurbishing existing areas by rethinking safety surfacing, widening gates for double buggies and wheelchairs, using brightly coloured gates so that people with visual impairments can see their way in. Good practice in the development of accessible play space is not seen as needing to involve new build projects or the latest and most fabulous pieces of equipment but to involve dismantling whatever barriers exclude disabled children from open accessible play spaces.

Playground amenities officers may have to contend with constraints imposed on the extent to which they can make play space accessible to disabled children. For example, where they are obliged to put fences around playgrounds this can restrict the size of the play area. Playgrounds that are integral to a park are popular with both children and their parents. For parents the possibility of finding a shelter near to a playground increases the length of time they are likely to spend there. This is particularly true for families whose children have complex impairments. A nearby café that offers shelter and warmth is a popular feature of the top-rated play spaces for all families, and for those with vulnerable children can be a key determinant of whether a play space is viable. Storage places for wheelchairs and buggies are helpful. For parents it is imperative that play spaces are clean. Whilst litter, graffiti and dog mess are concerns for all children and families, an unpleasant environment can particularly disadvantage

disabled children, for example those who may explore the environment through touch, smell or taste.

Parents say signs and notice boards can make a big difference in welcoming disabled children and their families to public play spaces. Parents feel wider access issues which impact on the access they have to play spaces, such as the need for easy parking and clean toilets, are rarely understood by others. A lack of toilets often means disabled children cannot use play spaces. Similarly for parents whose children cannot walk any distance a lack of parking facilities renders even accessible play spaces inaccessible. Campaign groups know that the provision of accessible toilets, parking and transport are crucial to the development of accessible play space:

There is no point in having accessible play facilities if we don't have accessible toilets, places for changing, places which are safe and warm for children and young people with medical needs and good transport and parking facilities.

- Campaigner

There is widespread concern shared by all stakeholder groups, that lack of accessible toilets in accessible play space threatens the dignity and well-being of children and young people and would lead to exclusion of disabled children and young people from even the most otherwise accessible provision.

Equipment

The design of equipment is central to the development of accessible play space whilst also being the “bread and butter” of the manufacturing industry. The challenge facing manufacturers is that of designing equipment that is saleable, challenging and accessible to disabled children. Families and campaign groups know that when taking account of the wide-ranging consequences of different types of impairment, it is unrealistic to expect all pieces of equipment or indeed all areas of a playground to be accessible to all children. Just as with non-disabled children, children with impairments require a wide range of different play opportunities. Not all pieces of equipment in a given play space need to be accessible to all disabled children in order for that play space to be an inclusive one.

Those involved in good practice initiatives have observed that non-disabled children like equipment they can use at the same time as their disabled siblings and friends. They find that non-disabled and disabled children overwhelmingly want to play together. Parents welcome opportunities for children of different age ranges to play on equipment together and a hallmark of high quality in an accessible play space development is that it will enable disabled children to take risks alongside their non-disabled friends. For parents and caregivers, being able to keep an eye on what's happening without being conspicuous or “crowding” a child is important. Campaign groups point out that a bench is much cheaper than a piece of accessible play equipment—and it may be the factor which encourages a parent to bring a disabled child into the space.

The space around different pieces of equipment can impact on children's access to and use of the play space. This does not simply relate to space for manoeuvring large wheelchairs. For example, the lack of space between items of

equipment can prevent children with learning difficulties from freely wandering around the play space. Some children enjoy watching rather than playing and consideration of the space between pieces of equipment can assist this. Playground amenities officers see the accessible play space debate as about more than physical access within play spaces. They acknowledge that equipment plays an important role in the development of good play space but know children also want to do things other than use equipment in play spaces. For disabled children this may be particularly true if they are excluded from most of the equipment. The most important feature of an accessible play space is thought to be that it should offer all children access to the social experience of play.

Play spaces can be experienced as places of disappointment and failure by any child if none of the equipment provided is accessible to them. For children who find equipment difficult a more generic approach to the design of accessible open play spaces is helpful so that they can play with or alongside other children without the distraction of equipment which is not appropriate for them. The requirement for design of "comfortable spaces" within or near equipped play facilities is recognized. Families, campaign groups and playground amenities officers are aware of the availability of items of playground equipment such as double width seesaws and springers with back supports that can be accessed by children with impairments. Some "specialist" equipment on offer is considerably more expensive than standard units which limits the scope playground amenities officers have when seeking to develop accessible play space. Accessible surfaces can incur substantial additional expenditure.

Natural Resources

Disabled children—in exactly the same way as their non-disabled peers—use play spaces in a multitude of different ways depending on their age, impairment, health, preferences and mood of the moment. They like using equipment, making dens, climbing trees and making use of the natural environment. In addition to the aesthetic value added by trees, shrubs, flowers and plants, disabled children often find a natural environment offers them accessible opportunities for play. Representatives of good practice projects have found that provision of quiet areas in a play space enhances accessibility for disabled children. Campaign groups are keen to point out that planting can be an important feature in good play space design. Playground amenity officers acknowledge that planting can be overlooked in play space development because there are additional costs associated with the maintenance of planted play spaces. Similarly water play is regarded as providing accessible play opportunities but maintenance costs of traditional water play facilities such as paddling pools, which need regular inspection and cleaning, can be prohibitive.

Disabled children and their families point out that what makes a play space accessible for one child inevitably can make it difficult for another. For example, a play space offering little in the way of texture, light and shade or planting can limit the experience of play for some young people with sensory or cognitive impairments. On the other hand, playgrounds designed to maximize sensory enjoyment may compromise access for other children—those using wheelchairs can be impeded by frequent changes in surfaces for example. According to children and their families, the trick to designing good accessible play spaces is about making sure there are contrasting play opportunities so that there is

“something for everyone”—there might be sensory planting, but also empty space and so on.

Who's in the Play Space?

Play spaces are not just for children but also for parents and care givers. The experience held by campaign groups affirms that the social world of disabled children comprises more adults than a non disabled child's social world, and improving accessibility to plays spaces needs to acknowledge and take account of this fact.

Heaven know how many times I froze to death sitting with the dog behind a tree—in theory enabling my son to do something, but equally I might have picked that particular play facility on the grounds I could actually park my car without it being towed away or because there was a tree with a bench to sit behind rather than sort of skulking in the background

- Parent and Campaigner

Manufacturers argue that maintenance and supervisory personnel within the play space is key to both accessibility and sustainability. Many parents would also welcome some kind of supervisory presence, particularly to reduce bullying. Campaign groups point out that, irrespective of accessible play space design, many disabled children and young people will need some kind of personal support or facilitation to be able to access it. This is not simply a matter of lifting and handling issues, but rather a matter of skilled play work to bring children together and to facilitate shared play experiences.

Working in Partnership

Effective consultation signifies the need for joined up working, collaborative enterprise and strengthening of partnerships. Although partnership working is successful in some areas many officers feel like lone pioneers in the task of accessible play space development and feel working in partnership with others from an early stage would be beneficial. Lack of integrated working can often mean leisure and cultural strategies seem to be almost directly at odds with the local planning process and responsibility for play spaces can get lost. Those we consulted report that whilst there is often the will in an organisation to promote joined up working, the absence of a policy framework doesn't allow it to happen in practice. The lack of a clear framework within which individual officers across departments can work together means that there is a lot of unnecessary duplication and failure to learn from good practice elsewhere. Joining professionals and disabled children and young people to work together on the development of accessible play space is felt to be the mechanism of choice for optimising sustainability.

Funding Matters

Actually getting the money to get on with the work of developing accessible play spaces is described by all stakeholders as a major issue. Playgrounds already in use are often not accessible in their design. Frequently in the UK there is no rolling programme of funding to replace old equipment and amenity officers find the issue of replacing equipment is hard to get raised in relevant policy arenas. Replacement of existing equipment that has outlived its useful function is not given the same priority as the provision of new equipment. This funding focus inhibits the possibilities of enhancing accessibility within existing play space and

ways need to be found of circumventing financial barriers. Some playground amenities officers encounter fewer financial constraints than others but there is consensus that in the UK not enough government funding is available to develop accessible play spaces. Hard bargaining with developers to secure better community facilities for play is crucial if accessible play spaces are to become commonplace across the regions of England.

How A Guide Could Help

Supporting local authorities to develop good practice is of key concern to all Government departments in the UK. They are keen not to instruct local authorities on how to do things but rather to help promote consultation to encourage local authorities in finding out what local communities want. A premise of consultation is prioritised—finding out what local communities want involving them in design and then throughout every aspect of the process.

Conclusion

To summarise, there is broad agreement that outdoor play is of crucial importance to children's development, health and well-being. It is widely accepted that disabled and non-disabled children should equally be able to access and use public play spaces. Good play spaces enable disabled and non disabled children to play together and make use of play equipment designed for both disabled and non disabled children. Further to this, enabling disabled children and their non-disabled siblings and peers to use play spaces together has wider benefits for social inclusion and community building and networking. In the UK, the Disability Discrimination Act and the Code of Practice attached to it need to be clearly understood in relation to the development of accessible play space. The importance of good design in developing accessible play spaces, which will give value for money, cannot be underestimated. A vital stimulus for accessible play space development is observed in the commitment and enthusiasm expressed by a broad range of stakeholders in making play spaces accessible.

Issues for further consideration arising from the research which are considered further in the guide include the importance of embedding understanding of the difference between disability and impairment in the minds of key stakeholders. Interpretations and understandings of risk and safety. Disabled children, like all children, want and need to take risks in play and many of their parents want this to be possible for them. Gaining a balance between risk and safety in play spaces provokes a wide range of views and some disagreement. Of crucial practical importance is the question of how to link up accessible play space development with essential subsidiary services such as toilets, public transport and parking. How seriously play is taken at local and national level, and what the implication of this is for work in practice, is key. Responsibility for play and how this is understood at local authority level, particularly at senior levels is equally important. Moreover, how able and confident people feel to consult with disabled children will determine how effectively their views are incorporated into policy, planning and design.

We observed during the course of the research an extended and genuine interest across a broad range of stakeholder groups involved in developing accessible play space in learning from what disabled children say. People wanted to know—in detail—what disabled children had told us about their experiences of using

play spaces and what they would like to see play spaces looking like in the future. At all of the workshops we held we used photographs that disabled children had taken, their commentaries and ideas, pictures they had drawn and so on, and the interest in these was enormous. It shaped discussion and often held us up in getting at other issues—so keen were people to return to comment on something a child had said.

Alongside this ran a deep interest in “how to” consult with disabled children, how to find them, who to approach, and how to avoid making them or their families feel uncomfortable in the process of consultation. We have concentrated a chapter of the Good Practice Guide specifically on these issues and include an indicative example here for reference (see [Appendix](#)). Click [here](#) for the full Guide [PDF 766 Kb].

Our feeling at the end of the project was that there were two overarching interests which participants highlighted and saw as key to developing accessible play spaces which all children can enjoy. These were:

- the desire to learn how to learn *from* disabled children
- the need to make efforts and develop mechanisms to bring together various individuals and groups each taking small steps towards improving accessibility

By way of conclusion, we draw attention to the discussion outlined below which contrasts different models for the development of services and facilities to support disabled peoples access to and inclusion in everyday life. This discussion is adapted from the *Report on the Application of the Social Model of Disability to the Services* provided by Birmingham City Council written by Mike Oliver and Peter Bailey (2002) which we think has important ramifications for the future development of accessible play space.

The Humanitarian Approach

Under this approach, accessible play spaces are developed and provided out of goodwill and the desire to help individuals and groups perceived as less fortunate. When these individuals or groups are children and young people, parents become the key recipients, and consultation is often aimed at and with them, so children are effectively “out of the loop.” This leaves providers in control of these services and users are expected, although often not explicitly, to be grateful for receiving them. The outcome of this is often that providers think they are doing a good job but users, when asked, can be critical and seen as ungrateful. This experience was shared with us by both users and providers during the course of the research. When play space providers feel they have expertise that others can benefit from and disabled people are perceived as a problem for whom extra work needs to be undertaken we found conflict ensues between providers and disabled people resulting in poor levels of satisfaction with services and facilities.

The Compliance Approach

Under this approach, services are driven by government policy and legislation. Obviously the DDA is of prime importance here in respect of services to disabled children, their families and other caregivers and policy commitments to improve accessibility to open, public spaces. This often means that providers adopt a

minimalist approach both to the principles and practice of service delivery and do only what is necessary to comply with the law or government regulations “to cover their backs” so to speak. Service users often feel disgruntled because they think they are being denied something they are entitled to or are confused about the providers' intentions. Again, this experience was shared with us by both users and providers during the course of the research. When providers feel constrained by rules and regulations a check list approach to accessible play space development can emerge and adherence to meeting minimum standards takes precedence over commitment to meaningful partnership. For disabled people this approach means their entitlements are not fully met as services and facilities are service rather than needs led.

The Citizenship Approach

This approach requires disabled children and their parents to be seen as full citizens with all the rights and responsibilities that are implied. There are three dimensions to this approach:

- disabled children and young people are seen as valued members of society - which means that they are actively consulted with and their views on and experiences of play spaces are given equal status to those of their non disabled peers;
- disabled children and young people and their parents are recognised as empowered individuals - and voters and;
- disabled children and young people are seen as active citizens with all that implies in terms of rights and responsibilities.

Only where this experience was shared with us by both users and providers during the course of the research is the relationship between providers and users of services a truly harmonious one in which play spaces develop in a truly accessible way.

During the course of the research it became clear to us that good practice emerges where the citizenship model is enacted in policy formulation, patterns of consultation and community involvement and commitment to service provision. To us, the citizenship approach, which reiterates key principles built in to the good practice guide, is the only approach likely to lead to the development of successful accessible play space.

Endnote

1. A note on language: Throughout this report we have deliberately used the language of social model of disability when referring to disabled children and young people. This means that we have used the term “disabled children” rather than “children with disabilities.” This language has been chosen because it does not locate the “problem” of disablement within the individual with impairment. Where it is necessary to denote the nature of impairment we use terms such as “children with learning difficulties” or “children with sensory impairments” which place the child before the impairment. Where the document makes use of quotation and different language, for example the term “children with disabilities”, is used we have not changed this.

Accessible play space photo gallery

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



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Appendix

Checklist—Components of Effective Consultation

Building Relationships

Remember that routine consulting, not always about huge issues, builds confidence and helps to establish relationships.

Use local forums, disabled people's groups and representative agencies where they exist.

Local support groups, care-giver networks and social groups can all help forge links and may encourage participation through their meetings and newsletters. Target under-represented groups by developing novel approaches to encourage participation. Video packages or CDs with sign language subtitles will benefit many hearing impaired people. People with learning difficulties increasingly use performing arts to facilitate their involvement in consultation. Gear some of your strategies towards people who cannot read.

Use intermediaries to access groups you are finding hard to reach. Many organizations run by people with learning difficulties have trusted advocates on their books. Providers of children's health and community services will have first-hand contact with families whose children are disabled.

Remember that communication is a two way process. Where you find communication difficult check you are being understood and that your own understanding is clear. Set aside extra time for careful listening. Be ready to accept that some people may have difficulties organizing their thoughts and sticking to time schedules.

Developing future good practice

Have you approached consultation as problem sharing? Have you explained to those you are consulting what you need help with? Disabled children and their families can feel vulnerable if the purpose of consultation is not clear.

As you get to know those you are consulting with, and who you may need to consult with in the future, how does this enable you to think about who is missing by virtue of being outside of the consultation loop? People with learning difficulties are often the last to be consulted.

Have you factored in that consultation can be informal as well as formal—what informal strategies could work well for picking up the perspectives of disabled children? Teddy Bear Picnics in LAPs? A Family Day in the park?

A film making project with teenagers? Sports Van visits to LEAPs, NEAPs or school playgrounds and after school clubs could provide children with chances to try out equipment and tell you what they think of it. How can you optimize the links you have with those you have consulted to avoid "single issue" one-off type consultation?

What about fliers or updates in local publications produced by disabled people? Can you bring disabled people or parents and children on to advisory and planning groups?