

The value of adventure playgrounds

Islington Play is proud of its dual role of delivering frontline play focussed facilities and sessions for children and its lobbying of and discussion with decision and policy makers about the importance of play opportunities for children.

We decided to create this report with two aims: to describe the specific impact on real people that adventure play has had and also to illustrate the importance of this way of working to achieve strategic aims that have been developed by the local authority to make children's lives better.

I am personally extremely passionate about the adventure play ethos that can give children facing enormous challenges in their lives the freedom, agency and choice that can enable resilience, self-confidence and increased ability to cope with those challenges.

As a child I used my experience of being at the adventure playground to find out about myself, my strengths and weaknesses and how I interacted with my environment. This sense of interconnection and interrelatedness is ever more valid in our modern technological world.

The adventure playground gives children the ability to explore space, time, environment, other people and their own impact on the world. This experience is created through the ebb and flow of connection to all the factors of their lives because play is recognised as arising from the individuals own self motivation in a way that hardly any other experience provides.

IPA remains firmly committed to the importance to and right of children to play:

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

The right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and [...] the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity." (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31)

Anita Grant
Chief Executive

1. Introduction

We were interested in the value that users past and present put on adventure playgrounds, and how this intrinsic value fits within what have been described as 'tension fields' between evidence, provision and social policy (Lester & Russell, Play England 2008) and the intrinsic, instrumental and institutional 'values triangles' (Holden, Demos 2006).

In particular we were keen to locate the role of adventure playgrounds within Islington Council's policy objectives for children outlined in the Fair Futures Commission report whose recommendations now form part of the overall Corporate Plan.

"A commitment to building life skills in the primary school years and developed through play – in adventure playgrounds, parks, leisure centres and play streets. Make the Islington Play Offer visible – in one place – to young children and parents." (Recommendation 2, Fair Futures Commission, 2018)

We looked at how adventure playgrounds fit within the spectrum of universal, targeted and specialist services available for children and families, providing 'Earliest Help' to children through positive relationships and high quality playwork. The Earliest Help approach aims to enhance the ability of children to shape their own lives and the world around them rather than (very expensively) dealing with problems later on.

But most of all we wanted to hear what Islington people said about the adventure playgrounds they used as children, and that their children and grandchildren use today. We were pleasantly surprised by the consistency of the responses: the powerful memories people had about their childhoods on adventure playgrounds; the

role the playgrounds had played in creating a sense of place and community; and how they were a lifeline for families today struggling with austerity.

What we didn't expect was that the word most used by the people we talked to wasn't "play" or "playground" though of course these were high on the list. The word most used was "know" in the sense of children getting to know friends, neighbours and their local communities through playing on adventure playgrounds. People from ethnic minorities – especially those not born in the UK - also mentioned how important the playgrounds were in helping them learn about and assimilate into the local and wider British culture.



2. Context

National

There has been a central government policy vacuum on children's play for almost a decade since the Play Strategy was abandoned in 2010. This has been exacerbated by unprecedented cuts of around 70% to local authority funding, which have particularly impacted on non-statutory children's services. Coupled with other austerity policies such as the benefit cap, the roll-out of Universal Credit and the freeze on social security benefits, there has been a particularly negative impact on low-income families, single-parent families and those with disabilities, as reported by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2018.

UK children are the unhappiest among the developed nations. While children's happiness with their lives rose steadily from 1995 to 2010, this progress started to reverse, with clear evidence of growing physical and mental ill-health in children. (Good Childhood Report, Children's Society 2018).

In 2013 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child produced General Comment 17 on Article 31 – the right of the child to play. It described the importance of play behaviours as "essential to the health and well-being of children and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills. They contribute to all aspects of learning, they are a form of participation in everyday life and are of intrinsic value to the child, purely in terms of the enjoyment and pleasure they afford. Research evidence highlights that playing is also central to children's spontaneous drive for development, and that it performs a significant role in the development of the brain, particularly in the early years. Play and recreation facilitate children's capacities to negotiate, regain emotional balance, resolve conflicts and make decisions. Through their involvement in play and recreation, children learn by doing; they explore and experience the world around them; experiment with new ideas, roles and experiences and in so doing, learn to understand and construct their social position within the world."

In 2016 and 2017 the Committee on the Rights of the Child examined the UK Government on its compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The conclusions were that "play provision, and the government's commitment to play, continues to lag behind the devolved nations." (State of Children's Rights in England 2018, Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2019).

In the last three years the Brexit agenda has pushed children's services to the very margins of government policy. Tellingly, the role of minister of state for children and families has been abolished, and this policy area is now covered by a junior minister with no specific remit for play.

Islington

Islington is widely perceived as being a wealthy part of London but this is in the context of it being the most densely populated borough in the UK with three times the London and 37 times the national average density at 15,524 people per square km. There is a very high level of inequality with 35% of children living in households where no-one is in employment.

This means children in Islington are third nationally on the income deprivation indicator and poverty is an issue in every part of the borough: there is a neighbourhood in every ward in Islington that is among the poorest 20% of neighbourhoods in England. (State of Equalities in Islington Annual Report, 2018)

Only 13% of the borough's land is green space, the second lowest proportion of any local authority in the country. This puts intense pressure on children's ability to play outdoors in green space in both the wealthier and the most deprived areas.

Because of these factors, the council has maintained a strong policy commitment to children's play, particularly to the adventure playground model of provision.

As a result, Islington leads the country in protecting its twelve adventure playground sites in perpetuity through Deeds of Dedication, which mean they cannot be sold off or developed and can only be used for children's play. Coupled with this is a commissioning framework which built on a comprehensive consultation to review the role of adventure playgrounds in supporting children and families.

"Islington has the least amount of green space of any London borough and we were very keen to protect what little we had. The then administration wanted to make sure that whatever administration was in charge in future the adventure playgrounds would be protected and couldn't be sold off or used for other purposes. And we were responding to a major consultation in which adventure playgrounds came out very high in family priorities. With cuts kicking in when we protected them it was an important vote of confidence in staffed adventure playgrounds." (Councillor Richard Watts, Leader of Islington Council)

"I can't emphasise enough how incredible it is that these spaces have been protected. Play is such a vital part of childhood, and we're so proud and delighted that our adventure playgrounds are protected." (Christine Lehmann, Commissioning and Quality Manager, Fields in Trust blog May 2019)

In 2017 the council set up a Fair Futures Commission to examine how every child and young person in Islington had the opportunity to thrive, enjoy their childhood and achieve their true potential. In 2018 it confirmed it would take on all of the recommendations of the Fair Futures Commission and formally incorporated this commitment in the Corporate Plan.

"Islington is a place where the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' is stark, and where one in three children are growing up in poverty. We strongly believe that prevention and early intervention is the key to building a fairer Islington - and it's that guiding principle that will underpin how we work. Implementing the recommendations of the pioneering Fair Futures Commission will help us to achieve this." (Islington Corporate Plan, 2018 - 2022.)

A major strand of support for children and families is the Early Help Strategy 2015 – 2025. It is based on research showing that being healthy, social skills and self-confidence develop when children play as babies or in their primary school years; that outdoor and adventurous play with nature are important and that play teaches young children how to deal with risks, social and creative skills. Without this awareness and learning they are ill equipped to deal with adult life.

Children and families

In every national survey carried out annually for Playday since 2003 children consistently put playing outdoors with friends second only to family as being the most important thing in their lives.

The Fair Futures Commission found that primary-aged children at some adventure playgrounds said that they hardly travelled or played out without their parents. Children and young people's use of spaces is linked to what they think about the threat of traffic and crime in the area. How safe children and young people feel

when making a journey affects whether they will go to a destination. ‘Gang lines’ are a serious barrier to travelling across Islington for young people who are affected by them.

“My dad doesn’t really let me out ‘cos it’s not really safe. But it’s really safe here so that’s ok.” (Girl, Timbuktu adventure playground)

The adults we talked to consistently emphasised how they had got to know friends, neighbours and the local community through the adventure playground. They had powerful memories of feeling safe at adventure playgrounds, making friendships that have lasted a lifetime, and how that was even more important nowadays for their children.

“It was one place that was always safe. Drawing, pottery, crafts – things you don’t get in normal parks or your average playground. My daughter enjoys it there too. My friends always wanted to go – we’re still all friends that group. I got to know my neighbours through the adventure – no postcode stuff because it was all one. The best thing was being able to be with all your friends in the same place.” (Parent, played on 3 Corners adventure playground)

“We weren’t allowed to play out so the adventure was where we got to know our neighbours because we went to a different school. We didn’t know English then because we had just come from Bangladesh so we went to a different school where our cousins were and could help us with our English. We could do things on the adventure playground like we could in Bangladesh, but not on the streets here. If I hadn’t gone to the adventure playground, I wouldn’t have known Islington life, just my own culture.” (Nursery worker, played on Crumbles Castle and Barnard Park adventure playgrounds)

“Saturday mornings – at eight in the morning we’d be there. Go-carts – I spent years over there – my whole childhood there. Still got mates from there – I bump into them still.” (Maintenance worker, played on Barnard Park)

This value that people put on their experience of adventure playgrounds, and their memories of the importance of just being able to be children and enjoy their childhood is very important to children and families, but rarely given a high priority in policy-making because it is difficult to measure.

However, organisations like Demos and the University of Gloucester have been looking at how these values can be given their true weight in relation to policy-making and the political process.

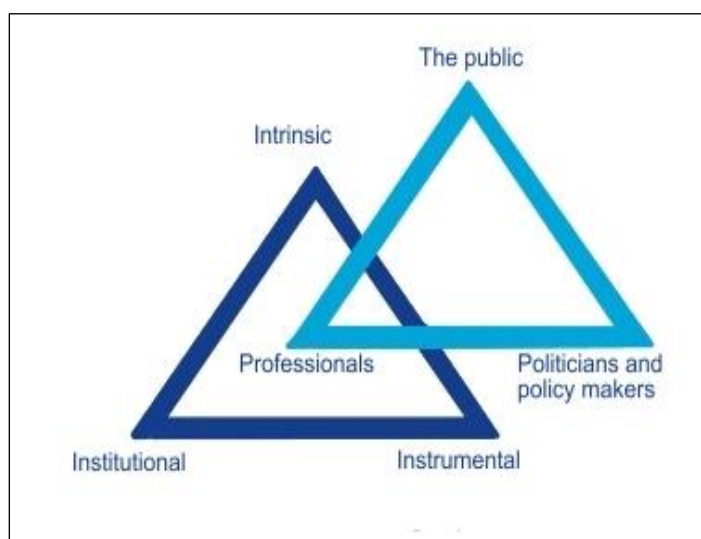
3. Understanding value

Demos analysts John Holden and Joost Beunderman developed the concept of overlapping ‘values triangles’ to show the relationship between different types of value.

Professionals tend to be concerned with institutional value, for example the added public good in delivering something like children’s services.

Politicians and policy-makers tend to be more concerned with instrumental value, for example how adventure playgrounds contribute to wider social or economic objectives.

But children and families are far more concerned with intrinsic value, for example the direct subjective experience of playing on an adventure playground and their capacity to improve family life.

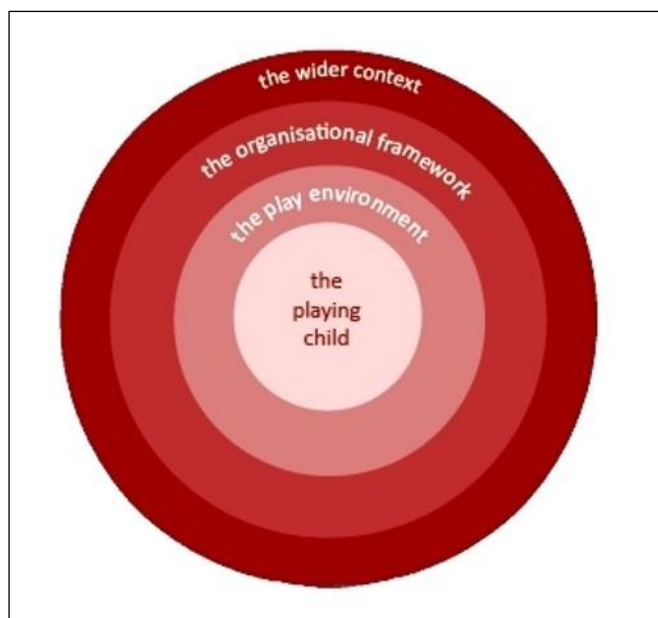


While there can be obvious tensions between these different types of value, and particularly how they are measured, they are in fact mutually supporting. Institutional or instrumental values can’t really make sense except in the context of the intrinsic value the public puts on services and how they are delivered.

The Fair Futures Commission approach and final recommendations make the same point – that decisions about services need to be about the intrinsic value to children and young people as well as about the systems and processes that deliver them.

“In setting up this Commission we started with one simple question. What do we as a Council, along with our partners, need to do to make sure that every child and young person in Islington, no matter how they start off in life, has the opportunity to thrive, enjoy their childhood and achieve their true potential?” (Fair Futures Commission Report, 2018)

This chimes with the ‘Manchester Circles’ model which places the child at the centre of staffed play provision.



The play environment includes both the physical adventure playground site and the skilled playworkers.

The organisational framework is made up of the policies and procedures, the “way we do things here.”

This is all within the wider context of family, social and economic circumstances, local and national government policies.

The model is based on a first principle that the playing child should have more influence on the play environment and the organisational framework, rather than the other way around. In other words, the play environment and the organisational framework must support rather than constrain children’s freely chosen play.

In adventure playgrounds the intrinsic value of playing is at the forefront, supported by institutional and instrumental values such as health and safety risk/benefit assessment, safeguarding procedures and efficient management structures.

4. Why is play important?

There is very strong evidence based on the scientific literature that children need to play, summarised here in the Playwork Principles:

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities.
2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.

Play for a Change, a major review of the scientific literature commissioned by Play England in 2008 concluded: “We are now beginning to understand the interrelationship between genes, the brain, the body, behaviour and the physical and social environment. This has enabled a deeper understanding of how play contributes to children’s physical and emotional well-being and to their development.

Contrary to the dominant belief that it is a way of learning specific motor, cognitive or social skills, play has an impact on the architectural foundations of development such as gene expression and physical and chemical development of the brain. In turn, these foundations influence the child’s ability to adapt to, survive, thrive in and shape their social and physical environments. Children’s development and well-being cannot be understood as separate from their environment.

Play can help build resilience – the capacity for children to thrive despite adversity and stress in their lives. Emotions have a key role in playing and play makes a major contribution to developing emotion regulation, building strong attachments and peer friendships, engendering positive feelings, and enabling children to cope with stressful situations through developing creative approaches and problem-solving skills.”

The review emphasises the importance of play in the ‘here-and-now’ of children’s lives as well as its role in development and deferred benefits later in life – the play process is crucial in how children build their bodies and brains.

“It is so important to kids to feel free, to just be yourself. For me and my kids the playground is about freedom. And friendship. Time to be yourself. And I always felt safe here even if I went over the edge sometimes. Having fun, just having fun you know? Even more so now in a very pressured world. Yeah that’s it – freedom, friendship and fun! That’s it for me.” (Parent, Toffee Park)

Play also helps children recognise and learn to manage risk. Since 1993 the Play Safety Forum, made up of the four national play organisations, the Association of Play Industries, Child Accident Prevention Trust and the Health and Safety Executive among others has been looking at a balanced approach to risk, challenge, benefits and safety in play provision.

This resulted in the Health and Safety Executive issuing a High Level Statement on children’s play: “Play is great for children’s well-being and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool. HSE fully recognises that play brings the world to life for children.

It provides for an exploration and understanding of their abilities; helps them to learn and develop; and exposes them to the realities of the world in which they will live, which is a world not free from risk but rather one where risk is ever present. The opportunity for play develops a child’s risk awareness and prepares them for their future lives.”

“And I remember my mates and I spending time there doing stuff our parents would never allow such as building stuff out of old wood and using tools my dad would never let me get my hands on. And fires! There was hardly a day went by when there was not something being burned such as rubbish or unusable wood. (Grandparent, Crumbles Castle)

“I have fun here. I like it here. Fires and making art things. And we climb on the climbing things. Really high up so it’s a bit scary at first but then you feel brave.” (Girl, Timbuktu)

“It gets creative and there’s lots of new things. Like you wouldn’t get normally get to do cos people think it wouldn’t be safe. But it is when you learn how to do it.” (Boy, Timbuktu)

“Do anything you want to do as long as it’s not too dangerous. Try things out to see if you can do them. Yeah, find things out. Find out that you can do things.” (Girl, Lumpy Hill)

5. What is an adventure playground?

Islington has 12 adventure playgrounds spread across the borough. They are open year-round in term time and holidays and are free of charge.

They are spaces dedicated solely to children’s play, where trained and skilled playworkers enable and encourage play activities not usually condoned in other play areas, such as digging, making fires or building and demolishing dens and other constructions.

“Imagine something and create it right in front of you. Camping and trips – things you’d never get to experience because your parents weren’t able to afford stuff. Adventure playgrounds give kids an option and bring out the best bits – gives you confidence. I won second prize for pavement artist of the year Tate Britain! Dancing, the Spice Girls, breezeblock carving, tennis tournaments where we could make up the rules, boarders on swings, different things you can try, a space to be free. Build something, knock it down and do something else with the wood. That’s how I learned to use a saw and be a carpenter now.” (Parent, played at 3 Corners)

“There’s talent shows and fires. You don’t get to do that stuff anywhere else.” (Girl, Timbuktu)



In adventure playgrounds children can engage in a full range of play behaviours. The children and playworkers continually create and adapt challenging and exciting play structures and features to make a place that children feel belongs to them and where anything is possible.

“Adventure playgrounds give you a place to believe.” Parent, played at 3 Corners)

Adults we talked to who played on adventure playgrounds as children consistently emphasised the life-long memories and friendships they made there.

“I met a lot of people there, it’s what you remember from childhood, not school and stuff like that. Everyone together, everyone got on. Still mates, though others have gone off and done their own thing. We got to know them there and we feel comfortable with them now, even older ones. The most important thing was friendship. Without the playground we probably wouldn’t be friends now. We would have known each other but we wouldn’t be friends like we are now. You didn’t have anything to worry about. Freedom – you couldn’t really get in trouble.” (Parent, played at 3 Corners)

They also talked about how the adventure playground gave them a sense of belonging – starting from the friends they played with and helping them feel part of a local community and the wider neighbourhood.

“But the main thing was lots and lots of kids. The whole of this area really – I wouldn’t have got to know them otherwise really, because it’s all different estates. It’s the same today – this is where kids from all over the area can get to know each other and no worries about being in the wrong place at the wrong time, know what I mean? I really think that’s what makes it more of a community round here, not like some other places with all the postcodes stuff.” (Parent, played at Toffee Park)

Children consistently talked about the importance of making, meeting and playing with friends - not surprising, as children have always said this has been the second most important thing, after family in national surveys for over 20 years.

“Play with friends. Like somewhere to socialise and stuff. I like to have fun and hang out with people. You can do that here without any worries.” (Girl, Timbuktu)

“Get to play with friends and make friends.” (Boy, Timbuktu)

“It’s good to hang out with friends. Role play and stuff together. As long as it is child friendly you can do lots of things.” Girl, Lumpy Hill)

“This is my first day. I’ve made a friend already!” (Boy, Lumpy Hill)

Parents highlighted the value to them of adventure playgrounds being free of charge both when they were children and nowadays in times of austerity and families struggling to make ends meet. They consistently described them as places that helped them have good childhoods and as family support services.

“I remember my mum working, it helped her to do that, being open the extra hours and the six weeks in summer. There ain’t nothing that’s free now – being free is really important. Money gets wasted in so many areas – this gives something back to the community.” (Parent, played at 3 Corners)

“If the playground wasn’t here parents would be very stressed out – I’d be pulling my hair out to be honest. I came since I was seven, and both my children use it now. They are very energetic and love running around so the playground is a great energy-burner! They come every day after school and it gives me extra free time. And talking of free – not having to pay definitely comes in handy.” (Parent, Toffee Park)

“Now as a parent I don’t know what I’d do without the playground. In fact, the whole community around here. I can’t imagine my life without the playground.” (Parent, Toffee Park)

“I’ll never forget the barge trip to Hampshire. Most of us never got to have holidays off the estate so that was amazing. Nowadays it is a big help to parents at work. People on low wages, they can’t afford childcare and after school clubs. Single mums can’t afford after school club fees so the adventure is a godsend for them because it is free.” (Grandparent, played on Baldwin, now Waterside)

“Woodchip on the ground, the smell of fires. Trips out. Cheese toasties – put to work in the kitchen! I didn’t have any money for sandwiches so I asked to help out – I never had a feeling of missing out.” (Head of Play, Great Ormond Street Hospital)

Islington adventure playgrounds run 'Family Days' on Saturdays in term time when parents can bring children under the normal age range to play with older siblings or get to know the playground before they attend by themselves when they reach six years of age.

Most of those we spoke to were relatively new to the concept of adventure playgrounds because their children were mainly under six. However, they consistently put a high value on what the playgrounds offered – partly because of the richness of the play offer and opportunities, partly because they were free of charge.

"This place is fantastic! I've lived here for 5 years but never knew it was here. I look on Hoop for things to do at the weekend but I've only just seen this today. Children really need these sorts of places where they can just run around and play in the dirt. I believe it is good for them. Good for their immune systems and their health. Good for children and good for the planet! (Laughs) It reminds me of Forest School but with much more freedom to do what they want. I think this is a great concept: the freedom the children have; it's staffed so when he is older we'll be happy to leave him here; and it's free! That is just amazing nowadays." (Parent, Lumpy Hill)

"I had no idea there were places like this – and they are free! They should be shouting that from the rooftops because we're always juggling can we afford this, can we pay for that. They love the mix of things here – madly running around one minute and then they'll be drawing or painting or just chilling out and then up that treehouse thing the next minute. There's just so much choice and freedom. And it's free! That is so unusual these days when you have to pay through the nose for everything. Can't wait until they can stay by themselves!" (Parent, Timbuktu)

"This is a godsend really. He can run around here to his heart's content and I don't have to worry about things like dog mess and who knows what like you might find out in the park. And then there's always [staff] here so that's another worry gone if anything did happen god forbid. You can see him working out what he can and can't do yet – you can see him sort of sizing it up and deciding 'maybe another day' but then one of the older kids might help him or give him a bit of encouragement and the next thing he's got a great big grin on his face and it's 'I did it! I did it!'" (Grandparent, Crumbles Castle)

And those responsible for commissioning children's services in Islington have a good understanding of the crucial role that adventure playgrounds have in providing a wide range of benefits close to where children live.

"Our adventure playgrounds are places where children and young people can really indulge their imaginations. They can play freely, make new friends, express themselves creatively, explore and have fun. And they can do this safely and securely – because they're staffed by playworkers, so children feel more able to test themselves physically. They're well used, particularly after school and during the school holidays, and being close to estates where people don't tend to have their own green space, they provide invaluable access to nature." (Christine Lehmann, Commissioning and Quality Manager)

6. Networks.

Adventure playgrounds are part of the Islington jigsaw of services – youth, parks, social services, safeguarding, schools and police – that play different but linked roles in making life better for children and families. The local knowledge and early warning signs picked up by playworkers can be a key part of preventative strategies – identifying what's becoming an issue before it escalates.

But even more importantly, by working as a community of practice within and across staff teams to share and learn what works, they have a very positive effect on the children they work with compared to children who for whatever reason do not attend adventure playgrounds.

Youth workers we talked to told us about how young people who had played on adventure playgrounds were different from other young people they worked with. They said they had a range of life skills, confidence and a strong sense of what was right and wrong. One of the key differences was that children who had used adventure playgrounds had a sense of belonging. Other young people they worked with often saw involvement in crime or gangs as the norm and a way of belonging.

"Children and young people who come to us from an adventure playground background are different. There's more creativity, more initiative, more common sense I suppose. And they are definitely more prepared to

engage. They can talk about mental health and emotional issues and are much better able to deal with transitions, for example from primary to secondary school. I'd say the adventure playground provides physical and psychological learning – understanding who your real friends are. What's safe and what's unsafe. For other young people we work with crime is often seen as a way of life or gangs as a way of belonging. For them it takes a year to 18 months to break through, while the adventure playground children have all been what we call 'youthworked.' They have a good understanding of personal safety, of what's right and wrong. They have a good basis for engaging with youthwork programmes." (Youth worker, South Islington)

They valued the fact that adventure playgrounds were locally-based universal services where children tended to 'vote with their feet' early on in their lives and become part of friendship and support networks. They saw that the intrinsic value for children of being on adventure playgrounds linked very strongly to the more institutional and instrumental values they were concerned with: prevention of harm, helping young people at risk and building a sense of community.

They said that the adventure playground children had a stronger and more positive sense of belonging and community. Whatever the individual circumstances of children, but especially for those most at risk or living in families that were struggling, the playgrounds had offered security, consistency and helped to build confidence.

"That is very important in building a story and community memories in a place that has very complex issues. Lots of layers going on making it difficult for young people not to get involved in crime and so on. The other group don't engage as much or only have superficial engagement. They haven't had that security. They go off track more because they haven't been distracted by what goes on at the adventure playground. The playground children want more, are thirsty for more, are more engaged and easier to engage. We see a progression through adventure playgrounds to junior to youth provision as an organic flow. We and the children can see what the adventure playground provides: somewhere to go that is consistent, constant and will be there for them come wind, rain or shine." (Youth worker, north Islington)

They also talked about how young people that had attended adventure playgrounds were better able to function and make something of their lives. There was a consistent message that adventure playgrounds had given children confidence and a sense of belonging that other young people they needed to work with had missed out on.

"They will come in here and just get on with stuff. They have that confidence, that sense of I know what this is, that other young people often don't have. The thing is, because we need to do so much targeted work with young people most at risk, we don't really need to deal as much with the adventure playground children as such. The adventure playground kids 'get' us while the others we work with don't or only have superficial engagement. Most adventure playground kids that move through us have meaningful jobs, and function well. They tend not to be chaotic and all have experienced work and employment training. We call them 'youthworked' because they have that ability to engage and think." (Youth worker, south Islington)

"What we are all trying to do is build this sense of community but we haven't the resources. The adventure playgrounds, especially with the protection of their land status are an invaluable resource that we can build a sense of community on and around. To recreate communities that have maybe fallen apart a bit. We need those true partnerships. (Youth worker, north Islington)

The police saw adventure playgrounds as key locations for children to have the freedom to play in safe environments, and highly beneficial to the youth in the area as places to socialise given the lack of green space in the borough.

"From a police perspective, the adventure playgrounds in Islington are highly beneficial to the youth in the area as a location for them to socialise and develop more skillsets which they may not otherwise learn at home. The playgrounds are one of only a few green space activities that go on in the borough and it allows children to have the freedom to play in a safe environment. For example, the children have involvement in the upkeep of the play area. It also gives parents some alone time with reassurance that their children are safe as they know exactly where they are." (Islington police)

They also valued them as places where they could engage with children and young people, for example through taking part in youth sessions for older children and young people in the evenings.

“It enables local police to introduce themselves to a young group so they feel comfortable with uniform and approachable in terms of seeing officers in plain clothes too. Furthermore, it helps children engage with police by building up that trust at a younger age.” (Islington police)

Many of the people we talked to emphasised the role of adventure playgrounds as places of safety, where children learn to look out for each other and create a feeling of community.

“You knew nothing bad would happen to you with all your friends. I still keep in touch with some of the people I got to know there – it was a real way of making friends. Mum used to trust me to go there by myself or with my mates but she would collect me at night. My grandson goes to the adventure now. Life would be an absolute nightmare without it. Without the playground there’d be a lot more trouble – fighting and that. What’s great is the bigger kids look out for the little ones and both of them learn something from that. That’s why the playground is needed – it helps to make a feeling of wider family, neighbours, of community.” (Grandparent, played at Baldwin, now Waterside)

Adventure playgrounds help to build a sense of community in other ways – for example as opportunities for volunteering for both individuals and companies. Because of their informal nature and ethos, they are seen as places where it is easier to “just help out or give something back” for people who might be unsure about committing to formal volunteering programmes.

“I think the most important things for me are feeling that I’m giving back to my local community, sharing those skills and having a sense of usefulness and I think it’s given me more than I’ve given it because I’m now connected, I’m much healthier and fitter than I used to be, I’m involved and I can see that I’m making a difference and that feels really, really good, to know that [the playworker] feels more supported, the kids feel that they’ve got someone else.” (Volunteer, Lumpy Hill)

Local volunteers emphasised that they got as much back as they gave; they felt that that giving a little in time or materials went a very long way in supporting the playground and gave them a strong feel-good factor in return.

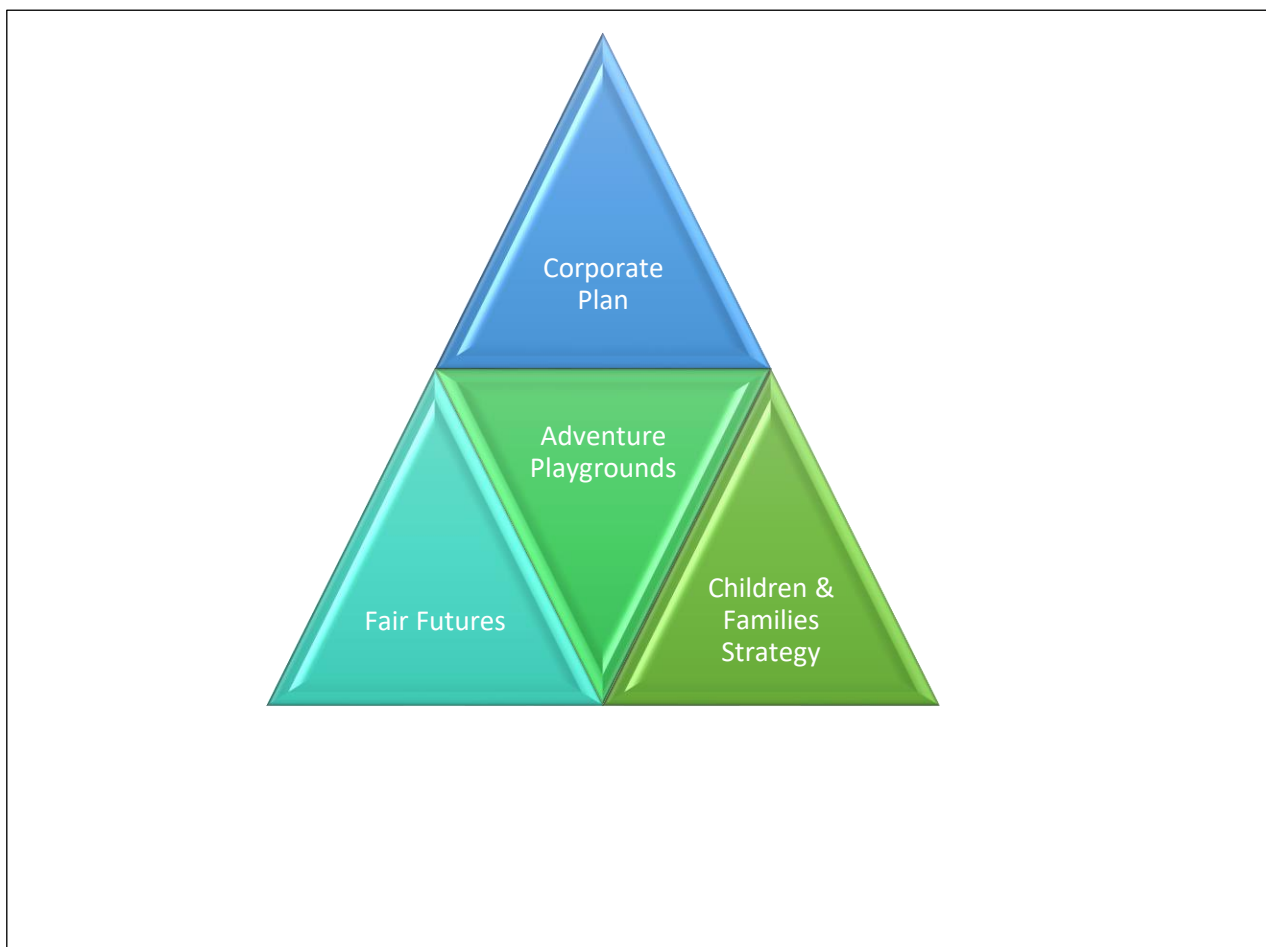
“I never realised, I mean I’m from a poor working class background but we always had food and we always had, I mean mum and dad were very keen, we didn’t have a tv when I was little but mum and dad were very keen that we always had books, we always had clothing and we always had everything we needed, maybe no luxuries and whatever but that’s fine and we were absolutely fine with that but to see families who don’t have food or it’s a bad time for shoes or clothing sometimes, and that is quite worrying and kids who, things like we all had a bike as we were growing up, you know it might be a hand me down from 2 or 3 brothers up the line but it was, you know we had that opportunity, and playing out in the streets we had, whereas kids can’t really do that anymore, you know, especially growing up in London so having that opportunity and having a grown up...I helped one of the little girls learn to ride a bike the other week, and that’s just wonderful, seeing a little one go from wobbling slow to ‘watch this’ and whizzing around in circles and doing figures of 8 and riding with one hand I think she is now (laughs) which is marvellous and all without the help of stabilisers which is brilliant. So if I can go across and help pump up the bike tyres or pick up a couple of footballs or send over whatever they might need...washing up liquid and stuff, just every little thing means that staff have more time and more energy available and they feel supported and I feel like I’m giving back instead of sponging off society and being a lazy layabout. And the exercise I get is just amazing, cos a game of football I don’t know how those children do it, it’s just exhausting!” (Volunteer, Lumpy Hill)

Equally, adventure playgrounds provide a wide and flexible range of opportunities for corporate social responsibility schemes. In Islington, companies like Colt, Budgens, Marks and Spencer, Tesco, Arsenal, Nandos and Warburg Pincus have used adventure playgrounds for corporate volunteering projects for decades.

“I just wanted to say a huge thank you for having us last Thursday, it was an absolute pleasure to see the park and the amazing work you do for so many local children. You really opened our eyes on how important it is to give children the chance to play in a creative way and build the friendships and skills that they will keep all the way through life, especially for the children who do not have the opportunities that so many others do at home.” (Corporate social responsibility volunteer lead)

The fact that the playgrounds are rooted in their communities and are used by some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children alongside those with better life chances gives corporates the feeling that they are making a real impact.

7. The strategic fit with council priorities



The Corporate Plan sets out the overarching strategic priorities for Islington council from 2018 until 2022. The section dealing with children and young people says: “We want young people growing up in Islington to feel they have a future here, and a sense of ownership over the changes they see around them. We want Islington to be a place where they can achieve their full potential, regardless of their background, with the best schools and the best services to support children and families in those early years. Implementing the recommendations of the pioneering Fair Futures Commission will help us to achieve this.”

A key recommendation of the Fair Futures Commission was to enable children to develop life skills through play, specifically in adventure playgrounds, which underlines the importance the senior leadership in the council places in the adventure playground model play provision as part of an integrated support network for children and families.

“Adventure playgrounds are a really important part of local provision for children, especially because it is provision that is free. Because they are staffed, they are used by some of the most vulnerable children and are places where they can develop all-important relationships with trusted adults. A lot of the value in all of this is for those kids who don’t have trusted relationships with adults. My message to children and families in Islington is use the adventure playgrounds. They’re there for you and they’ll be there in the future. They’re free to use, so just use them and have fun with friends! (Councillor Richard Watts, Leader of the Council)

Islington’s Children and Families Strategy 2015-25, Giving Children the Best Start in Life, recognises adventure play as integral to its strategic approach: “In our last strategy, we included a priority to ensure play, youth and leisure opportunities for children and young people. This work has progressed significantly since the last strategy with the completion of major reviews of adventure play and universal youth provision. The important continued contribution of play and youth services is built into our three strategic priorities.”

8. Summary conclusions

It is clear that Islington's adventure playgrounds are highly valued by people concerned with each aspect of the values triangles: children and families, professionals, politicians and policy-makers.

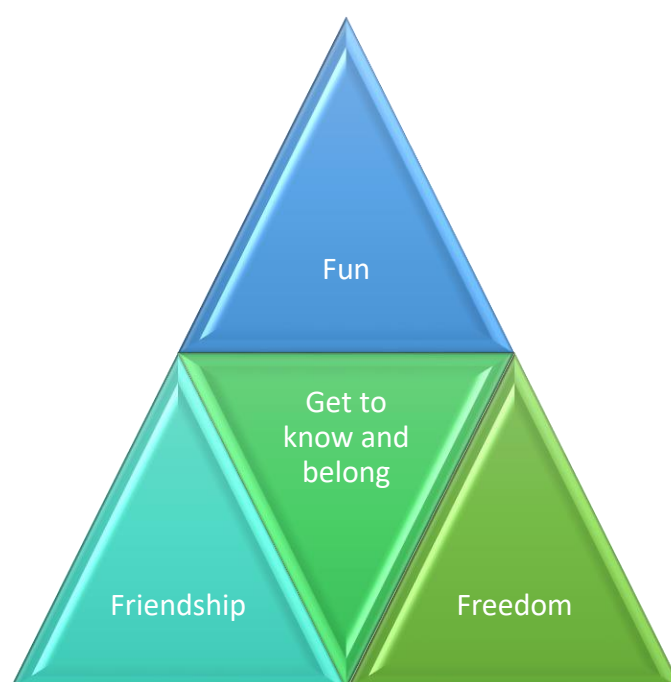
From families there is a consistent story going back decades that tells us how adventure playgrounds create lifelong friendships; give disadvantaged children experiences they could not otherwise hope to encounter; and help to build a sense of belonging and community regardless of ethnicity, social and economic circumstances. For families today struggling with the impact of austerity policies, the fact that they are free was typically described as a lifeline or a godsend.

We were struck by the powerful stories people told us about adventure playgrounds as places where children get to know local children and make friends, get to know the estate or local community, and get to know about different cultures. This aspect of adventure playgrounds being part of building the fabric of society in Islington down through the generations, creating memories and friendships that lasted a lifetime came top in the word frequency analysis of the interviews.

The professionals we talked to consistently emphasized the importance of adventure playgrounds as locally-based universal and free services where children could "vote with their feet" and build positive friendship and social networks. They said that children who attended adventure playgrounds had more life skills, confidence, a strong sense of what was right and wrong, a feeling of belonging. They saw the adventure playgrounds as helping to recreate communities that had "fallen apart a bit."

Politicians and policy-makers were clear that the adventure playgrounds were a key part of an integrated strategy to provide early help for vulnerable children, but within the context of a non-judgmental universal service in which children could build relationships with trusted adults. Their adoption of the Fair Futures Commission recommendations in full was mainly driven by what young people said about their lives in Islington today, including the role that the network of twelve adventure playgrounds across the borough played in their lives.

What children told us was essentially about yet another triangle: fun, friendship and freedom. This was echoed by the childhood memories of adults who have used adventure playgrounds for generations as places to play, have a good childhood and build for themselves a sense of self, community and belonging.



Appendix

Statement from IPA Patron Bob Hughes.

IPA - The value of adventure playgrounds.

Like all other forms of what has become known as 'play provision', adventure playgrounds are an adult construct for what is primarily a childhood manifestation i.e. play. And like schools and Care, play provision is continually at risk from the adulterating forces of society, whether benign or not.

The pressure for play provision to 'do good' is immense, a virtual black mail that children are expected to conform to particular social norms or funding and support will not be forthcoming.

And yet, human children, like the young of most other species, have always played, and, one assumes, gained benefits from so doing. Only in the past five or so decades has provision existed and with it increasingly specific stated socio-political outcomes.

The literature is very persuasive in its implications that the beneficial scope from playing is huge. That when children go out to play, away from adult strictures, whether in nature or in urban spaces, they discover and create ways of being and organising, testing themselves and evolving skills, better knowing a locality and its inhabitants, exercising control and power, and creating visions of the future. All child based and not driven by adult preconceptions.

In short, science sees play primarily as a development and survival mechanism that enables ours and other species to overcome the problems which all generations have and will face as we move into the future. Play is the province of the child and should always be seen as that.

However, increasingly, those who 'provide', contaminate children's play with issues of importance to the adult world. So while play for children is seen by them as simply what they do, play for adults currently boils down to what children should do, what we want them to do, what they need from playing – all issues the answers of which adults cannot know and cannot provide for.

So while adult society can provide for play, it can never be sure that what it provides actually addresses what children, and this is about children, need in terms of spaces and ambiance for their play to be successful in their the children's, terms. Society can be more child-based and systematic. What they can do, is use intuition, their own childhood memories, their professional experience and the scientific evidence to enable them to make the 'best available guess' and this is what we are doing in Islington.

What we offer is a special place for children where they can discover what they need to better navigate life as they live it, in a friendly, supportive, authentic and stimulating space.

We are not trying to create model citizens (although this may be an outcome), or superior athletes (although this may be another). Neither are we forcing adult agendas down children's throats after a hard day at school. What we are offering is a place to relax, to interact with environment and with other children and even with other species if that is what the children want, what we offer is a place which truly belongs to children and childhood, where they choose from infinity for no reason other than that maximises fun and freedom, and not the fear which is endemic on the streets.

On Islington's adventure playgrounds, because they are created from our knowledge of childhood and development, we believe that we are giving the children of Islington what they seek from the adult world – not preconceived answers, but infinite questions and a space fit for Islington's children in which to answer or ignore them. Bob