



# Communities build sustainability



When housing estates bordering Dukes Meadows in the West London Borough of Hounslow featured in a BBC Panorama programme about racism some years ago, many residents felt that it did not reflect their community. A proposal to sell off football pitches in the park was the last straw. It catalysed the community, which came together to fight the plans forming a Friends group, now known as Dukes Meadows Trust (DMT), to reverse the decline, improve the area and protect it for future generations.



With a major BIG Lottery Fund grant, DMT turned neglected parts of the 150 acre space into an inspiring, accessible, award-winning, unique open space. A semi derelict Pavilion, once described as ‘a magnet for arson-minded teenagers’, now provides workspace for artists. Alongside the weekend Farmers Market, it generates much needed revenue for DMT to sustain the improvements of this great outdoor space with its adventurous play area.

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## Rise and fall . . .

Dukes Meadows, near Lord Burlington's classic villa Chiswick House, was once a playground for the wealthy. In 1923 Chiswick Urban District Council acquired it to create a recreational area for the growing residential communities. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the old play area in the park had become uninspiring and the equipment was nearing the end of its life-span. Local residents wanted it improved and later reminisced: **“We used to go to the playground but it was not much fun as there were only four old swings, baby swings and one small slide.” “There was always broken glass on the ground and not enough seating for the mums to chat.” “It was for the little children and it wasn’t very good, it was very basic. The old paddling pools were disused.”**

Lack of investment in capital improvement in parks over decades had left playgrounds in a poor state. The removal of defunct equipment meant local children had fewer places to play. Around Dukes Meadows, stated a Primary Care Trust report, almost half the children (45%) were living in income deprived households. Private leisure facilities in Chiswick – for sport and play – excluded people unable to afford the entrance fees. The few free, good quality play areas catered mostly for the needs of very young children. There was nowhere for older children to meet, or for disabled and non-disabled children to mix and feel equally welcome. The new play area was expected to provide an exemplary facility, with the potential to inspire investment in play spaces elsewhere.

## . . . and resurrection

The transformation was passionately led by DMT, the community driven conservation charity set up to restore the riverside park, focusing on its leisure potential and bio diversity. It successfully involves volunteers from across the community who help maintain the community garden and orchard, plant trees, bluebell bulbs and shrubs; care for the hedges; prune; repaint benches; pick litter and remove graffiti.



In 2006, DMT had completed a project which included a new foot-deep paddling pool with a central fountain, a sandpit, and a refreshment kiosk, within landscaped surroundings. The area provided 2-8 year-olds and their families from affluent and poorer backgrounds alike an area for interaction.



To fill the gap in play provision for 8 - 15 year-olds, whilst recognising the mounting evidence base of the benefits of playing in nature<sup>i</sup>, a challenging and inspiring adventure playspace was created with prime funding from BIG Lottery Fund's Playful Ideas strand.

The design embraced the park's natural features including a dry riverbed creating a flexible play area that changes over seasons.

## Children's participation

The project's success is based on the consultations over the play area designs with local children, carried out in two stages. Cavendish Primary School Year 5 pupils and disabled children from the nearby Croft Centre



produced drawings and essays showing their ideas. Their discussions were videoed, forming the major part of the briefing for the architect. Several ideas were popular: high slides and bridges, trees to climb, hiding places, dens, places to jump and practise balancing skills, stepping stones, boulders. Children commented on the architect's 3D model and felt it reflected their aspirations. Thus, the play area became an inclusive environment, catering for the needs of and providing challenges for children with different abilities, encouraging them to play

together. A post-completion Children's Panel meeting in December 2011 evoked the reflection that **"we felt listened to"**.

## Building sustainability from the start

Kathleen Healy, a DMT founder member, lives on an estate beside the park. A qualified banker, she understood the need to create assets: things that would generate income, as well as raising funds for capital improvements. She says **"the playgrounds are hugely valuable and something we are proud to have created, but recognising that they are, in a financial sense, liabilities was key to understanding the need to create enterprises to generate revenue to pay for their maintenance and replacement over time"**.

The first enterprise established was a Farmers Market which has been running weekly for more than ten years and currently grosses over £20,000 per annum. Income from the market together with grants for repairs and renovation of the old Pavilion created ten rentable artists' studios. In 2012, DMT used its reserves to add four more studios to boost its income to £80,000 per annum. These funds not only contribute to maintenance and repairs, but also pay for nature study classes for children from the estates



and free family activities in the summer, and help employ a Ranger to recruit and involve volunteers and continue to engage the community. The funds will also build a reserve to replace equipment as it reaches the end of its life.

## The council

Hounslow Council gave an undertaking to grant DMT a 25-year lease on the proposed play area once funding was secured. A similar arrangement had been reached with the Council for the water play area, highlighted in its Play Strategy as a promising example of giving community groups responsibility for managing play facilities. DMT shares the maintenance task for the adventure play area with the council which makes weekly checks, but is solely responsible for the maintenance of the water play area.

Local people, including children, volunteered to clean the Meadows up and in practice show that the myths about difficulties maintaining natural materials are largely unjustified:

- The correct choice of materials can contribute to their longevity.
- Volunteers from the Lawn Bowling club cut the grass every week.
- Oversight of the paddling pool was made affordable by a smart lease on the kiosk beside it, built as part of the project. Its operators are trained and are responsible for checking (two-hourly) and maintaining the water quality in the pool and the pool plant. This solution saves the cost of employing an attendant, which would have made the facility unviable.



The maintenance of the completed play area was soon complimented. **“Not a lot of litter”**. Adults rated the maintenance from **‘good’**, **“very well maintained”**, to **“fantastic.”** **“Its location is free from traffic and the surfaces safe – so as good as it gets really.”** **“Another great area locally where we can take the kids for outdoor play and fresh air.”** **“I love having an outdoor play area which is easy to access and always has kids from the area there.”** **“A good place to come and not worry about kids’ safety in the play area.”**

## More than picking litter

Sustainability requires more than keeping a place tidy. The close involvement of the community ensures the project is directed by its ultimate users and is designed to meet their needs and aspirations. DMT Founder Kathleen Healy explains that connecting various strands of the local community to work together makes the project sustainable.



**“The leadership from young people and of the community was a key factor. It promoted local ownership of it and reduced problems of vandalism. The involvement of the Croft Centre helped ensure that the play area meets the needs**

**of children of different abilities. Now children come to Duke Meadows to meet and play together, fostering greater understanding and acceptance. Some children involved with the playground now work in the Farmers Market.”**

One of these is Dylan, now 15, one of the children involved in designing the play area from the start:

**“I got involved with the consultation because I thought it would be a great idea to work in the community for kids to enjoy the playground in the future, even when I’m no longer around. It was kind of cool. We had regular meetings and it wasn’t boring, we had lots of fun and it’s made a great impact on me. I learned about society and community and became more confident interacting with the team. When Dukes Meadows Trust asked me whether I’d like to work in the Market, I didn’t mind ‘cos it gives me more of a role. It’s a good thing to do.”**



His brother James, 16, adds: **“It’s really good to see ideas put into practice. I remember the old place, with its squeaky swings and wood from the climbing frame scattered on the floor. Now us 6<sup>th</sup> Formers go to Dukes Meadows after school, to meet up. My friends seem to have a fascination with being on the basket swing.”**

## Result

People from across Hounslow and neighbouring boroughs give the new play area a universal thumbs up: **“What a transformation! Now it is completely brilliant and the best playground in Chiswick. It has made Dukes Meadows a popular weekend destination for families and after school it's always busy too. We adults sit chatting for hours and appreciate the variety of seating”.**



**“I feel very lucky to have such a great playground on my doorstep and it is bringing great pleasure to a large number of families.” “Very happy with the playground – great improvement to the area.” “We use it more at weekends and in holidays, not just after school.” “We come more often, meet with friends there, go after school.”**

Clearly, Dukes Meadows has become an important factor in cementing the community, developing ‘social capital’: the network of social connections that exist between people, and their shared values and norms of behaviour, which enable and encourage mutually advantageous social cooperation. One parent said: **“It makes me happy about the area**

**we live in and happy for the children.”** And as Dylan’s story indicates, social capital also means passing on the practice of community engagement between generations.

Dukes Meadows could be a replicable model for sustainable play provision for community groups working in partnership with local authorities. But developments like this do come at a cost, not only financially. They need a number of passionate, hard-working people with a vision to make it happen. But the results seem to make it well worth the effort.

## Top tips from lessons learned

From the start and then throughout:

- Think about revenue funding. Create assets that can generate income as well as liabilities (maintenance)
- Know the cost of maintaining, repairing and replacing the things you build and secure commitments or develop plans to meet those costs.
- Seek strong community leadership
- Develop a strategic plan and long-term vision for the project
- Research and know your facts
- Develop the confidence and research to produce evidence to break through traditional ‘health and safety’ wisdoms
- Consult with and ensure ongoing engagement of children to create a real sense of pride and ownership
- Be inclusive in every sense and accept what others have to offer
- Retaining/improving natural features is highly appreciated.
- Natural materials and features which alter with time maintain interest throughout the year
- The quiet wildflower garden offers a chance to explore local wildlife.
- Keep people motivated and seek the commitment of local volunteers for maintenance
- Celebrate successes

*Article by Dr Ute Navidi, former Chief Executive London Play, now independent consultant*

For further information please contact:

Dukes Meadows Trust office, The Pavilion Market Drive, Chiswick W4 2RX  
admin@dukesmeadowstrust.org

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<sup>i</sup> *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*, a government-commissioned review of the state of health inequalities in England led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot (2010) states: “Green spaces have been associated with a decrease in health complaints, blood pressure and cholesterol, improved mental health and reduced stress levels, perceived better general health, and the ability to face problems. The presence of green space also has indirect benefits: it encourages social contact and integration, provides space for physical activity and play”.