

Islington plays - forever

A case study of Islington Council's adventure playground review



The children of Islington know that their 12 adventure playgrounds will not only always be there for them to play in, but also for their children and grandchildren – and so on in perpetuity. The funding to support them is also assured until at least 2015. So while elsewhere in London people threaten to chain themselves to the railings to protect their playgrounds from demolition - how did Islington go about successfully securing the future for play?

Islington is known for its commitment to play – indeed the need to preserve and promote play opportunities in a borough which has the second least

amount of open space per person in the country is particularly acute. Redressing the balance, the borough boasts more adventure playgrounds per head of population than any other London borough apart from Lambeth. Of its 12 adventure playgrounds, six are run by voluntary groups and the other six by the council. It also boasts a strong play association in the form of Islington Play.

The review board

Early in 2011, the council recognised that in order to maintain its commitment to play in the face of significant budgetary pressures, it would need to take a more strategic approach to providing its adventure playgrounds. An adventure play review project board was convened in April 2011 to support the development of a sustainable future plan. Indicative of the high level, cross-cutting nature of support for play across the borough, the board included representatives from both council and voluntary run playgrounds, public health, large voluntary organisations in the borough and various strategic leads from within the council including those with expertise in property and finance.

The group met eleven times over the space of a year to consider a huge amount of material and evidence gathered during the review period, including through data profiling, research and consultations. Play strategy and inclusion development manager Christine Lehmann explains: “Through this we were able to establish, for example, that some of the most vulnerable children in Islington were proportionally over represented among those who attend the playgrounds.” It was this sort of evidence which helped persuade the council that revenue funding should be maintained at current levels, she says. It also agreed to stick to the principle of providing adventure play which is free for children at the point of access.

Play in perpetuity

The board also thought that the land that the playgrounds occupied should be protected in perpetuity for that purpose. Islington Play Association was particularly interested in seeing this happen, says Christine. “They did a lot of background research into various ways of achieving this, and were a great support.” The council approached the charity Fields in Trust, and they have worked together to bring additional funding into the playgrounds including London Legacy Funds - leading to

the council Executive's decision to adopt a legal covenant called a 'deed of dedication' to protect the sites. This commitment gave the council the confidence to pursue the additional investment in sites that the board identified was needed, and to this end, it has forged a new partnership with the Royal Bank of Scotland. This has seen more than 1,800 volunteers working in five adventure playgrounds to make improvements which have been designed and agreed with the children who use them. The partnership has provided £300k of additional investment for the playgrounds and means that the play service can be maintained at current levels with vastly improved facilities.

Recognising the benefits of risk

The icing on the cake is that Islington Council has recently published a risk benefit policy which will require anyone providing activities or equipment around play to carry out a risk-benefit assessment. This recognises that some level of risk is beneficial in play, and should be weighed against the benefits that it provides; however as many will know it is a revolutionary concept in many local authorities. Even in Islington, it took a year to get the policy agreed. Christine says that being able to present strong case studies really helped persuade some of the more doubtful individuals to sign up: "There was a lot of debate and explaining that some risk is ok, both in supervised and unsupervised settings," she says. The policy has now been signed off by the directors of environment and regeneration and children's services as well as corporate health and safety, and links directly to the 'Managing Risk in Play Provision' guide.

Play proponents in other boroughs eyeing developments in Islington enviously may wonder how they could achieve similar success in their own areas. Of course there is a long history of adventure play in the borough which means that the benefits of play are already broadly recognised and there is an interest in seeing them maintained. However, Christine says that supportive councillors and the existence of a strong play strategy are key. The play strategy means that a whole range of council services take play into account, including departments such as planning, where the play team works closely on things like Section 106 agreements to ensure that developers provide adequate play facilities. The links between play and health

are also recognised, and as public health moves under the auspices of the local authority, have the potential to become more closely entwined.

Islington deserves praise for its bold and decisive action in defending play in the borough. With the diversity of interests represented on the adventure play review board, we can only speculate that consensus was not always easy to reach – in particular its final recommendation that the individual contracts for the six voluntary run playgrounds be terminated and retendered as a package. This was agreed by the council and the contract is now in the process of being tendered, with a new provider to take over in April 2013. Developments will no doubt be watched with great interest across London.

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