

Lots of eggs in lots of baskets

Haringey's Somerford Grove Adventure Playground survives by taking a 'pick and mix' approach to funding



As a storm erupts over Wandsworth Council's proposals to privatise its adventure playgrounds, a seasoned play professional in Haringey says that a flexible attitude and a 'mix and match' approach to funding is what is required to keep adventure playgrounds afloat.

Haringey Play Association (HarPA) chair Nick Jackson spoke to delegates at London Play's Annual General Meeting on 27 October 2011 about the challenges of keeping an adventure playground running in an austere climate. Somerford Grove Adventure Playground was opened with great fanfare by the Haringey Play Association in the summer of 2005, with the aim of "putting play

at the heart of the community." Funding was provided mainly by Big Lottery and the Children's Fund, with very little support from the council.



Having never been reliant on council funding, HarPA has always had to be proactive and creative in financing the playground's operation. This has made it slightly more resistant to the impact of cuts to local government. Among the things it has done to raise money is to rent the building to an under-fives group for four mornings a week; and to undertake consultancy work for other playgrounds and for Haringey Council, helping write its play strategy. The playground also received a visit from Channel 4's Secret Millionaire, which resulted in some additional money (although not enough to make them rich - as many thought!)

Renting facilities to schools and other organisations

A local school brings its pupils to use the playground on a regular basis, and another organisation runs a closed session for autistic children each week; both pay a fee which helps keep the playground viable. The playground is also available for hire for events such as children's parties and christenings, although HarPA trustees decided to disallow adult parties on the grounds that late night noise, alcohol and smoking create too many issues to make it worthwhile.

Reduced hours

However, eventually funding has become scarcer, and what was a six day week operation has now been reduced to three three hour sessions a week, with a longer session taking place on Saturdays. Some part time play workers have been made redundant as a result.

Cutting down building costs

The trustees also made the bold decision to stop using the building and to move all activities outside. In light of staff reductions, protecting the fabric of the building took up too much time and diverted play workers away from their core role. A couple of shipping containers to provide storage space and shelter have been installed and campfires, barbecues and events have continued whatever the weather, with no shortage of enthusiastic participants.

Corporate sponsorship



Shipping containers

Efforts to attract funding of course continue, and corporate sponsorship is another avenue that the playground is pursuing. A presentation to a hundred bankers at the Royal Bank of Scotland resulted in 50 volunteers turning up to rebuild part of the playground as well as a significant donation being made. Although Nick said the playground does use volunteers extensively and that this is one way of keeping costs down, he warned "don't think you can run a playground solely using volunteers." Volunteers have a lot to offer but they also need to be properly recruited, vetted, trained and supported and cannot replace trained, experienced and qualified play workers.

Partnerships

To survive, Nick suggested, "We've got to go back to being a bit subversive, and find areas that play can contribute to, be that health or elsewhere." The Children's and

Adult Mental Health Service is planning to start a drop in service at Somerford Grove in the near future, and Nick said that the council had become increasingly interested in the potential of the playground to help it connect with local people who are deemed 'hard to reach', because "there is no stigma associated with visiting the adventure playground." These and other opportunities for raising funding should be explored, he said.

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