



If a Play Area is the Answer

National
Trust

What is the Question?

Helping National Trust properties think through playful outdoor offers and activities

Introduction

This 'think piece' aims to support managers who are considering creating or refurbishing play areas and spaces to guide discussions through some of the options. Rather than starting with what kind of play area is needed, the note starts with a more fundamental question: what kind of offer engages children, families (and perhaps adults too) to help them discover and appreciate the significant characteristics of a property.

National Trust context

Beyond holding bays

What - and where?

How should play facilities be designed?

Opportunities for innovation

The magic ingredient: loose materials

But what about health and safety?

What about our existing play area?

Feedback and learning

Taking things forward

Conclusion: work in progress

Resources



National Trust context

Improving the visitor experience is a strategic priority for the National Trust. The Trust also wants to broaden its membership and visitor base, with an emphasis on the Explorer Family market segment. These are both good reasons for property managers and staff to re-imagine their properties: to see them through the eyes of children. By understanding what it is about the buildings and landscapes that might excite, stimulate and intrigue children, properties will lay the foundations for a truly engaging visitor experience.

Beyond holding bays

Properties contemplating play provision should start by asking themselves why they think such a facility is wanted or needed. National Trust properties, like other landscape, cultural and heritage sites, are special places that need to be conserved and respected. However, in many cases the main or sole rationale for play facilities is to create a kind of child-oriented holding bay or warehouse: a place for 'letting off steam', or a way of drawing children away from locations where their presence is perceived to be a nuisance or an irritation to others. Children themselves rarely gain any insight into the destination: at worst, they may as well be in a municipal playground. This is not a good rationale for play areas on Trust properties. Indeed, such facilities are a huge missed opportunity, given the time, energy and money that may have been spent. With the right offers and invitations, children of all ages and abilities can come away from properties with a deep sense of what makes them special and unique: a sense that is all the more powerful because it has been acquired through their own imaginations, creative efforts, explorations and discoveries. What is more, having a single, limited location for children can create its own management issues and conservation challenges. Taking a more creative, thoughtful approach is likely to result in better site management, improved visitor flows and more effective conservation efforts.

Therefore, before embarking on a play space project, property managers should clarify what they want children to gain from their visit, and how children will make meaningful connections with the property. It may be that other kinds of playful, creative offers or activities take away the need for dedicated play facilities. Playful initiatives that could be considered include:

- animating and interpreting collections, buildings and landscapes;
- offering structured, facilitated activities and events;
- revising and opening up exhibits, collections and displays for exploration;
- creating temporary play structures or spaces;
- installing positive signage that encourages or suggests playful activities;
- developing leaflets, packs or other learning resources that facilitate exploration, discovery or creative activities.

What - and where?

Once the decision has been made that some kind of permanent play facilities are warranted, the next questions should be: what, and – just as important – where? Taking location first, this should not just be a matter of convenience to the car park or café, or the distance from other locations. Location should be thought of in relation to the overall visitor offer. Remember that while the traditional footprint for a play space is a single, enclosed area, other forms are possible. The Forestry Commission, for instance, has created a number of extended play trails at its visitor centre sites (most notably Moors Valley in the New Forest, and Westonbirt Arboretum). These lead families on an exploratory journey through the wider woodland.



At Westonbirt Arboretum, the Forestry Commission has built a number of intriguing structures to engage children and families.

Properties may find it useful to carry out a playful audit of their property, taking a holistic approach across the wider site. This involves a comprehensive walkabout to identify locations where different kinds of play activity might be offered, and where play is already taking place. Are there, for instance, spots where there is evidence of den-building, or where fallen or felled branches might be left to encourage this activity? Are there intriguing bushes, trees or landscape features that might, with a little modification, become sites for climbing, hide-and-seek or imaginative play? What about trails towards viewpoints or spots by ponds, lakes or riversides?

Turning to the choice of play facilities, the conventional approach is to rely on fixed play equipment, whose job is to provide opportunities for various types of physical play – jumping, spinning, sliding, climbing and so on. These facilities may have their place in local neighbourhoods and municipal parks. However, at Trust sites, which are special and unique, such equipment will rarely if ever be enough to establish the depth of engagement and stimulation that is possible once a richer palate of structures, materials and offers is considered.

How should play facilities be designed?

Creating fine play space is an art, and takes creativity and imagination. One very useful creative starting point is to think about how the spirit or essence of a site or property - what leading Danish landscape architect Helle Nebelong calls the 'genius loci' - might be captured or highlighted, and to bring this out in playful ways. Think about links to children's worlds, stories and lived experiences. Is there information about the lives or childhoods of current or previous residents of a property that can form the inspiration for a play feature? What about geography, geology, wildlife or plant life? Or livestock, or pets?

The Government-sponsored publication *Design for Play*, published by Play England, sets out ten principles for designing play space. They state that successful play spaces:

- are 'bespoke'
- are well located
- make use of natural elements
- provide a wide range of play experiences
- are accessible to both disabled and non-disabled children
- meet community needs
- allow children of different ages to play together
- build in opportunities to experience risk and challenge
- are sustainable and appropriately maintained
- allow for change and evolution.



These mythic play structures, built in public land near a new development on the outskirts of Copenhagen, are part of a non-traditional, sculptural set of play features designed by the artist Alfio Bonanno. Bonanno's design, which alludes to Denmark's seafaring heritage and its postglacial geology, aims to "engage children of all ages and... form the background for nature education and outdoor activities."

A good play space will make engaging offers to a diverse range of children and young people: boys and girls, older and younger children, and children with differing abilities and disabilities. This is a better approach than creating facilities that are segregated by age or ability, since these restrict children's choices and activities, and also make it more difficult for families and visitor groups to spend time together.

Simply taking the time to watch children and young people at play is a valuable source of information and ideas. Try to visit a diverse range of sites, especially those that are not conventional play areas, with a wide mix of ages, where children are closely accompanied and more free to roam. Observing how children and families spend time at a beach or a busy public park, for instance, reveals a great deal about what engages different age groups, and also about how families keep an eye on their children's activities and movements.

It will almost always be helpful to bring in some outside expertise to help with designs, and perhaps to lead the design process. The Trust's Central Visitor Experience and Volunteer team is collating case studies and a list of recommended designers., (although this is not a comprehensive list). Look for people or practices that have a track record of creating innovative, unconventional play spaces. A clear design brief is essential. Find other similar properties or visitor attractions that have taken forward successful projects, to see their briefs and to learn from their experiences.

It will also be useful to involve children directly in design. This should be carried out with the design team, and the engagement process should be developed with them. Children can give useful information about both the location of facilities and their form and content, and hence help to refine a project brief. They can also give valuable feedback about concept designs. However, children may have limited experience of unconventional play facilities, so they should not be the sole source of design ideas, nor the final arbiters of design decisions.

Access groups and groups of parents of disabled children and young people are another valuable source of design ideas. Such groups can help address access and inclusion issues such as seating and path layouts. But they can also come up with a different perspective on what makes places playful and engaging to children with a range of needs and impairments.

Opportunities for innovation

The Trust is in a position to be much more creative with play space design than local authorities and other public bodies. Sites are usually more contained, and often there is some staff or volunteer supervision or oversight. There may be a more limited number of children using sites, and locations are usually easier to protect from vandalism, abuse and inappropriate behaviour.

Even within municipal play provision, the view is gaining ground that relying solely on fixed play equipment is limiting and uninspiring, and there is growing interest in ways to widen the offer. For instance, some providers have created facilities where children engage with the space not just through sight and movement but also sound, touch, smell and taste. A broader trend, sometimes called 'natural play,' is to use natural materials, hard and soft landscaping, ground modelling and bespoke structures to recreate something of the feel of a

natural woodland or countryside location. These offers can be further enhanced by adding sandpit areas and water supplies or features.

Another innovative approach is to introduce artistic or architectural elements, perhaps in the form of playable or climbable sculptures, or alternatively more formal water features. The John Madejski Garden at the V & A, and the fountains at Sheffield's Peace Gardens and Somerset House and City Hall in London are all fine examples of the latter.

Fountains and other water features, like these in Lisbon and London, are intrinsically playful and engaging to people of all ages.



City Hall fountains, Lisbon fountain

The magic ingredient: loose materials

Children's imaginations are greatly stimulated when they are provided with objects, props and materials that they can use creatively. These might be building materials such as sand, stones, timber, blocks or rope; props such as tools, toys or household objects; natural materials like leaves, tree branches, seeds or shells; or dressing up clothes or fabrics. Playworkers use the terms 'loose materials' or 'loose parts' to describe such items, and their presence will transform any indoor or outdoor space or facility. Thoughtfully chosen loose materials – a box of silk scarves in front of a mirror; buckets and brushes in a stable with some model livestock animals and a water supply; gardening tools and raised beds in a formal garden – turn a passive space into an invitation to explore, engage and imagine. Sandpits, which already offer a fine construction material (especially with the inclusion of a water supply) can become an ever-changing resource simply through the use of an evolving stock of tools, containers and decorative items like stones, pine cones, seashells and foliage.



But what about health and safety?

Play spaces are comparatively safe places for children to spend time, and playing in play areas is a comparatively safe activity for children. Despite this, providers fearful of the threat of litigation have historically tended to be highly formulaic with their provision. However, in recent years the climate has improved, in part due to a realisation that a preoccupation with safety and fear of court cases was leading to poor use of resources and unengaging offers to children.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no specific legislation for play areas: like any other part of a property, they are covered by general legislation such as the Health and Safety at Work Act and the Occupier's Liability Act. In law, the over-riding safety management principle, which applies equally in dedicated play facilities and in parks, woodland, open spaces and the countryside, is for the risks to be at a reasonable level. Property managers are not under an obligation to eliminate or minimise risks.

The Government-sponsored (and HSE-endorsed) publication *Managing Risk in Play Provision Implementation Guide* makes it clear that in play spaces, parks and other similar areas, a degree of risk and challenge can be positively beneficial, because of the benefits to children. Safety should be addressed through carrying out a risk-benefit assessment rather than simply a risk assessment. Risk-benefit assessment will help property managers to take a more thoughtful, balanced approach to play space design and management. The Trust's current Health and Safety Intranet topic page on adventure playgrounds makes reference to this latest guidance, and the Health and Safety team is planning to update its current documents to reflect the risk benefit process.



Props and loose materials like buckets, pine cones or gardening tools are an open invitation to children to follow their imaginations.

What about our existing play area?

Properties that have play facilities may well find that they do not live up to the aspirations set out in this note. Hence there may be an inclination to remove or substantially revise them. However, while such action may be right over the long term, as an immediate response it may be too hasty. Children who regularly visit a play space often hold it in some affection, and may have developed a repertoire of enjoyable, engaging games and activities, even if the design itself is mediocre. A speedy removal may lead to disappointment and complaints from children and parents. It may be better to plan for complementary facilities, and/or ways to enhance existing sites to better connect them with properties (perhaps through the addition of loose materials). Parents and children who use existing facilities may also be a good source of ideas and feedback about any new proposals.

Taking things forward

Properties considering outdoor play will find it useful to put together a working group to develop projects that address play and children in the outdoors. The table below sketches out a process that should help take things forward. This process will need to be modified to take into account budget, timescales, resources and capacity.

Conclusion: work in progress

This note aims to encourage property managers to rethink the offers they make to children: to move away from the idea that the only possible response is a conventional play area. Some properties have begun to do this, and to try new approaches. The Trust is keen to share and learn from their experiences and ideas. The Trust's Central Learning Team would value feedback from property managers about the content of this note, about what else might help, and about the outcomes of new initiatives.

Feedback and learning

As with other changes, visitor input and feedback will be valuable, both when drawing up plans and proposals and for finding out how initiatives are being received. The views of both family groups and visitor groups without children will be useful, since all visitors are likely to have views, and any changes are likely to prompt responses and reactions from them all, not just those with children. However, it is wrong to expect visitors to be the sole, or even the main, source of ideas; families may have low expectations about what might be on offer, and many visitors will have limited experience of the range of changes that might be possible.

- 1 Form a project team, bringing together the key property/ regional/ central staff.
- 2 Find out what other similar properties have done, and what central advice and guidance is available. Visit sites – ideally with children!
- 3 Carry out a playful audit across the whole site.
- 4 Review information and feedback from visitors, and gather information about the views and ideas of a range of visitors, including children and families.
- 5 Identify site/s and draw up a brief, ensuring there is a strong, clear rationale that engages closely with the property's unique qualities. Pull in external expertise from designers to respond to the brief with outline proposals.
- 6 Canvas on the proposals within the property and beyond, including 'friends of' groups and visitors.
- 7 Refine proposals to draw up a site plan.
- 8 Commission/carry out site works.
- 9 Carry out appropriate post-installation checks.
- 10 Monitor impact and gather visitor feedback.

Resources

David Ball, Tim Gill and Bernard Spiegel, *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide*, Dept for Children, Schools and Families 2008

Tim Gill, *Growing Adventure*, Forestry Commission 2006 and related resources. Available from <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play>

Aileen Shackell, Nicola Butler, Phil Doyle and David Ball, *Design for Play*, Dept for Children, Schools and Families 2008

DCSF documents available from <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/play/>



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Page 5 right - Frode Svane

Page 6 middle - Helle Nebelong

Pack cover - Himmelhoj Sculptural playground Ark - Designer Alfio Bonanno

Written by: Tim Gill

Editors: Shelley Fielder