

Neighbourhood play and community action

Haki Kapasi

This report describes the experience of five community groups who were supported in the development of local play areas.

The project's aim was to develop and pilot a practical and comprehensive set of resources (a 'toolkit') for improving public neighbourhood play spaces and services for children and young people. At the same time it was hoped that the community's direct involvement in the piloting would develop their own abilities and experience in planning and implementing such schemes.

This report details each stage of the process, including the initial development of the toolkit, the experiences of each of the five community groups in implementing the toolkit, and the impact this implementation had on the groups themselves. The study reports how, through their participation in the pilots, all those involved increased their skills, confidence and knowledge and brought substantial additional resources into their communities.

This report will be of interest to all those involved in community development and in developing play areas for local children and young people.

The *Neighbourhood Play Toolkit*, developed during this project, is available on CD-ROM from the National Children's Bureau (www.ncb-books.org.uk).



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1 Background

The Children's Play Council (CPC) received funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Housing Corporation to carry out a three-year action research project to develop play opportunities in local neighbourhoods in partnership with local communities and agencies.

The *aim* of the project was to:

- develop and pilot, in a small number of areas, a practical and comprehensive set of resources for improving public neighbourhood play spaces and services for children and young people.

In addition:

- The resources developed during the project would be published as a 'neighbourhood play toolkit' which would lead stakeholders through a community-based participative process for identifying and implementing change.
- The draft toolkit would draw on the Children's Play Council's existing publication *More than Swings and Roundabouts: Planning for Outdoor Play* (published April 2002) and other relevant resources aimed at supporting community participation.
- The project would also contribute to the ongoing development of Best Value Performance Indicators for the Audit Commission's Library of Local Performance Indicators.

2 Developing the toolkit

Early drafts

Based on discussions with the advisory group it was agreed that the draft toolkit should be:

- **Comprehensive:** it would support a change process that goes across a neighbourhood and addresses all key groups.
- **Age-sensitive:** it would recognise that children and young people of different ages have different and potentially conflicting needs and wishes.
- **Participative:** it would recognise that children and young people's use of public space is often contested, and hence consensus building is a key part of the process.
- **User-friendly:** it would aim to be simple, practical and flexible enough for people from a range of backgrounds to use in a wide range of contexts.
- **Inclusive:** it would seek out the involvement of groups who may traditionally be excluded from decision making about public space, such as children and young people from minority ethnic communities, children who are disabled or have other specific needs, and girls and young women.

The final toolkit was to describe the following processes:

- developing strategic objectives – e.g. geographical scope, priorities, budget
- identifying key people and stakeholder groups
- agreeing common aims and values
- assessing needs: supply and demand, existing provision, development plans
- developing an action plan
- implementing change

- management and maintenance
- monitoring and evaluating the process and outcomes.

Recruiting the pilot projects

In order to develop and test the toolkit materials the Children's Play Council recruited partners who were prepared to make a commitment to the project including an agreed allocation of officer time to support the pilot process. These local partners also agreed, at the start of the process, to make an in-principle commitment to implement emerging proposals, in order to demonstrate to residents that the process is meaningful. There was also an agreement to develop Local Action Plans.

As part of the project, the Children's Play Council employed a Development Officer to support all five pilot projects. The Development Officer visited applicants and assessed whether they met the criteria for being involved in the toolkit project.

The following pilot projects were recruited (see Chapter 3):

- Boston Mayflower Housing Association, Boston, Lincolnshire
- the Adlam estate in Liverpool
- the KinCraig estate in Blackpool
- New Earswick village and the Victoria Geldof estate in York.

The main reasons they agreed to take part in the toolkit development project were the opportunities the process offered such as:

- developing children's activities
- community involvement, participation and development
- learning new skills
- accessing specialist advice
- sharing knowledge with other pilot projects

- gaining local consensus
- working with a structured framework, located in the principles of community development, to achieve their aspirations.

Testing and developing the materials

The Children's Play Council Development Officer worked with the pilot projects for approximately 18 months. During this time she supported the development of the groups and helped them grow their plans for the play area. The lessons learnt through this intensive support process were translated into materials for use in the toolkit (see Appendix).

Producing the toolkit

Lessons learnt from the pilots were combined with additional information gathered through desk research to produce a wide-ranging resource, the breadth of which lent itself to be produced as a CD-ROM rather than a print publication.

The toolkit covers the following areas:

- starting points – what is play?
- developing and supporting a steering group
- involving the local community, especially children
- assessment and planning, including play audit
- rules and regulations
- designing for play
- getting publicity.

There is also an extensive resources list and many resources are actually available on the CD-ROM.

Additional benefits

An inadvertent outcome for the pilot projects was the leverage offered by being involved in a nationally recognised project. Both in Blackpool and Liverpool, the participants were able to use the fact that the results from the pilots would be disseminated nationally to get 'buy-in' from partners such as the local authority. The potential of national exposure gave impetus to ensuring that pilots were successful.

Initially, the pilot project participants had little understanding of the total process. This understanding and their confidence grew as they participated in the toolkit process. The pilots varied in their levels of confidence, leadership, resources, partnerships and vision. This, inevitably, resulted in differences in how they evolved and what they achieved.

This evaluation report outlines the themes and issues that emerged from the pilot projects and considers the original aims and objectives of the action research project and to what extent the toolkit met the aspirations identified in the original brief.

3 The pilot projects

Boston Mayflower Housing Association, Boston, Lincolnshire

Boston Mayflower Housing Association, working with Children's Links, a childcare development agency in Lincolnshire, aimed to develop five existing play areas which they had inherited as part of housing stock transfer from the Boston local authority. The housing association had already carried out some consultations with local families, children and young people and had drawn up a business plan to develop the play areas. This included a 'Play Watch' scheme and a scheme for developing a Charter Mark for play for Registered Social Landlords..

The CPC Development Officer worked with the housing association and a multi-agency partnership group, to identify how the findings from the consultations could be used to develop play areas more suited to local needs instead of just refurbishing existing sites. The group also wanted to support the Boston Mayflower Housing Association to address its commitment to play.

The major hurdle for Boston Mayflower Housing Association was obtaining funding for capital works even though, once installed, revenue funding for maintaining the play areas was available. This is not an unusual problem with housing associations, as they are often considered too large to receive funding for play.

Adlam estate, Liverpool

In this pilot project, the Development Officer created a partnership between the Fazakerley Youth Action Group (FYAG) and Fair Play for Children, a voluntary organisation operating in the area. The project also received support from the housing association in the area – Cobalt Housing – and Liverpool City Council's department for parks and gardens.

FYAG had been working in the area for a number of years developing activities for local children and young people. The group was part of a tenant management organisation supported by Cobalt Housing which had recently taken over from Liverpool City Council in managing the estate. The group was hoping to develop nearby parkland in the centre of Adlam Park. The park was used by both the local people and a wider catchment area.

Until February 2003 there had been a well-used play area in the park at the centre of the estate. However, in the middle of the toolkit project, Liverpool City Council removed this, considering it to be unsafe. This incident highlighted to the local community the need for neighbourhood play facilities.

The Development Officer met regularly with the group, which held events to consult with local community members, especially children and young people. The children stated clearly that they wanted to see the park back in use.

Although supported by the Development Officer, the steering group was unable to follow the toolkit process systematically. Even though the group had written an action plan, rapid developments around the park area meant the situation often changed dramatically between meetings. Nevertheless the steering group was able to pilot, use and help develop tools to suit their changing needs.

Kincraig estate, Blackpool

The Blackpool pilot project took place in the Kincraig area, in the north of Blackpool. The local Children's Fund manager seized the opportunity to pilot the toolkit in this area. A Neighbourhood Play steering group was established which initially only consisted of professionals from the voluntary and statutory sectors and a local councillor and no local community members. However, without any prior notice, a group of local residents attended a meeting with a list of demands. This meeting was the milestone that led to rich community development work and the development of play opportunities for children in the area. More local residents were recruited onto the steering group through a variety of sources including events and word of mouth.

The residents' estate was originally built to house retired people and each of the three distinct areas had a Day Centre. However, over the years increasing numbers of families with children had moved into the area leading to strong intergenerational tensions. There was also very little provision for children in the area.

The Development Officer worked alongside the steering group to develop and test the toolkit. As well as working closely with the group, the Development Officer was involved in a launch day for the opening of a new play area funded by one of the local housing associations.

Neighbourhood play and community action

Over the two years of involvement in the toolkit process, the steering group evolved to consist primarily of local residents and the local councillor. They had active support from the Children's Fund. Members of the steering group developed into a cohesive, collective force that brought significant changes and development to the area. They accessed a range of training opportunities, organised a number of activities for children and young people and worked successfully with the local press. A local Barnardo's project worked with the group to establish a children's focus group and young people from the Kincaig area became involved and discussed their priorities for the area.

In the two years of its participation in the toolkit, the group:

- completed an action plan for 2003/04
- completed an action plan for 2004/05
- helped open the Kincaig Playground
- named the Kincaig Fun Zone (playground)
- upgraded the Stronsay Community Centre to make it suitable for use by children and young people
- initiated an environmental project to develop the space around the new play area – over 250 children from the local primary school were involved in this project
- carried out initial consultations to upgrade the Kincaig Lake
- applied and was successful in its application to the Lottery Living Spaces fund
- established a constitution for the Neighbourhood Play Steering Group.

New Earswick village and the Victoria Geldof estate, York

In York, the Children's Play Council worked in partnership with Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) on two estates: New Earswick village and the Victoria Geldof estate. Community members had expressed a need to look at existing provision on both of these estates.

The two areas have very different characteristics. New Earswick village was built a hundred years ago and the Victoria Geldof estate only ten years ago. New Earswick has a number of opportunities for children to play, including some well-maintained pieces of play provision. However, these were not always used to their full potential. The one playground in the Victoria Geldof estate has been closed for over two years because of excessive vandalism due to its location.

The Development Officer worked with local groups to launch the project in the two pilot areas in York. The launch events were very popular and well attended, particularly in New Earswick. However, over the period of the toolkit project, the number of people taking part fell despite the initial enthusiasm. This proved difficult but the Community Development Officer from the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust continued to move the project forward and completed a play audit. This was then cross-referenced with what people had stated they would like to see in consultations.

The report has led to:

- the production of a leaflet telling people about all the activities available for children and young people in New Earswick
- a discussion paper being sent to Communities that Care (a prevention programme being run in New Earswick) to see how the two projects could develop work together
- a consultation project being put together to develop an existing play area in the centre of the village, including new provision for under fives, and to look at developing play provision in the north of the village.

4 The impact of the process on the pilot projects

As well as their contribution to the Neighbourhood Play Toolkit project, there were significant additional outcomes for the groups involved.

The toolkit as a focus

Participating in the toolkit provided all the pilot groups with an essential focus. While the draft toolkit was in a continual process of development, taking part in a structured programme provided a useful framework for the community groups. The whole process was named the 'toolkit' by all the participants even though the toolkit itself was the final product of this process. 'Toolkit' became a term to describe the process in which they were engaged.

Each phase of the pilot project was useful in itself, even if the groups did not follow the linear process identified in the draft toolkit. It is highly unlikely that the pilot projects would have carried out consultations or developed actions plans without following the steps in the draft toolkit.

The toolkit provided some boundaries encouraging focus on *play* opportunities rather than any other issues – outcomes were clear which helped to harness energy, time and resources.

Accountability

Participating in a national project encouraged accountability from all those taking part in the pilots. Participants were aware their actions and results would be written up and distributed nationally and this engendered a strong sense of ownership for the whole process. Reporting progress to the Development Officer added to this need for accountability.

Developing a vision and a problem-solving attitude

Because the aims and objectives of the toolkit were clear, and through the process of involvement and engagement, community members developed a clear picture of what they wanted in their area. They had identified places and spaces for change. This created a strong problem-solving attitude and determination to achieve their vision. Despite conflicts, barriers from partners or a lack of resources, everyone involved, particularly participants in Blackpool, Liverpool and Lincolnshire, were resolute in reaching their goals.

A strong champion

The most successful pilots were those where the project had strong champions or lead agencies. The champions were able to network effectively, bringing in resources from various different sources. They paid attention to process as well as outcome, making sure the pilot project steering groups were supported and encouraged. The champions also created opportunities to publicise the projects and in Blackpool this has resulted in the project being nominated for the Community Group Award run by the Blackpool Environmental Action Team. The champions often had the authority to influence relationships between agencies and bring together different initiatives and resources.

In the pilots where a champion was not present, there were difficulties in moving the project forward, identifying and sharing resources and working in partnership with other agencies to reach the same goals. There was also a lack of communication between different agencies which resulted in isolated developments and duplication of projects and parallel initiatives.

Feedback from the Development Officer indicates that, for success, it was vital to identify a lead agency or champion who would have a clear commitment to implement any actions needed, facilitate the groups and hold the vision.

The role of the Development Officer

All the pilots agreed the Development Officer played an important role in the process. They were all complimentary about the Development Officer, stating she was a useful source of information and advice and provided enthusiasm and

knowledge. They welcomed her expertise and skills in community development and in encouraging the participation of young people. They appreciated her responsiveness to changing situations as well as providing a framework for development.

The majority of the pilots felt that she, as someone external to their area, was able to offer objectivity when they were sometimes embroiled in conflict between community members and with partners. The 'external expert' role gave a raised status and authority to the pilots. This was particularly important in the communities which sometimes lacked confidence.

Pilots commented that, in addition to the Development Officer, it would have been useful to have access to a local development worker who had knowledge of local issues and the local area. The Development Officer also felt that it was unrealistic for one person to support five projects, particularly in such disparate geographical areas, and that in future additional resources should be made available for more staff.

After 18 months, the Development Officer went on maternity leave. This created a sense of loss and grief for some of the pilot projects, particularly those which had a heavy reliance on her. They felt they had lost a vital source of information, support and expertise. For a variety of reasons, CPC did not replace the Development Officer, which meant the groups were left with no one to continue providing support. The consultant writer to the project did visit all the groups to check on progress, and occasional phone contact was given by the CPC project manager, but this could not replace regular contact with a Development Officer.

However, the unexpected positive outcome of the Development Officer's departure was the creation of self-reliant, resourceful and creative groups. The toolkit had started a process which had taken root and abandoning this process was not an option for them. They were determined to continue and this determination was accompanied by an increased confidence in their own capacity to lead the project through.

Given that she was based in London, the Development Officer herself felt her role should have been one of consultant to the groups, but that the groups needed her, at least initially, to be available on demand.

The importance of building consensus

One of the key successes of the toolkit process was the opportunity to engage in community consultations. Most of the pilots had had little experience of conducting consultations with adults, children and young people. A number of methods were used for the consultations, such as games, photos and other visual images, mapping exercises and questionnaires.

The consultations not only showed common concerns and anxieties between different groups of people, they also helped break down barriers between them. In Blackpool, for example, there was initially strong resentment from the older members towards the children in the neighbourhood. They refused to allow the children to use 'their' Day Centre for play activities. Over a period of time, this changed and some dramatic results have occurred, such as the refurbishment of the Day Centre so that it is child-friendly and increased dialogue between the older members of the community and the children.

When there was a lack of support from community members, progress was slow, and in York the whole project came to a halt until further work was done by the internal development worker and the toolkit Development Officer.

Additional resources

The toolkit provided resources to each of the pilots primarily in the shape of the Development Officer. The Development Officer identified a lack of resources as one of the barriers to progress; lack of staff or staff overcommitted with other work demands was also a barrier.

However, through taking part in the toolkit development, the pilots have attracted additional resources. Blackpool to date has received a total of £40,200. It has submitted an application to the Heritage Fund for £25,000 to develop a play area. Liverpool has attracted £1.1 million to build a community centre and a playground. Boston Mayflower raised £82,000 from various sources.

For Blackpool and Liverpool, the toolkit provided a purpose for their fundraising. With increased knowledge and confidence, they were able to fundraise substantial sums of money for their communities.

Using unexpected incidents

While the toolkit offered a structure for developing play spaces, sometimes unpredicted incidents drove the pilots forward. In Blackpool, for example, the attendance of local community members without invitation helped to create a more community-based and community-responsive steering group. Before this incident, the toolkit partnership consisted primarily of professionals. In Liverpool, the local authority removed a playground, deeming it to be unsafe, without consulting the local communities. This galvanised the toolkit steering group to take action and contact the local authorities. In Lincolnshire, it was the stock transfer of playgrounds to the housing association that generated the interest in the toolkit. In York, the employment of a new development worker by Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust created another opportunity to develop children's play areas.

Responsiveness, flexibility and target setting

All the participants in the toolkit development project stated the value of being flexible and adaptable. The draft toolkit anticipated a linear approach to developing a play area but, in reality, communities have their own relationships and processes. Unexpected events often detracted from the stages approach identified in the draft toolkit. For example, in York, a lack of attendance at the consultation events and at steering group meetings meant the toolkit Development Officer and the Community Development Officer had to reassess the viability of continuing as they were and changed their course of action. In Liverpool, the community had to respond to the unexpected opportunity of the installation of a new playground by organising a quick consultation.

The project that least followed the linear approach of the draft toolkit stages was the Lincolnshire project. The project was led by staff from the housing association with support from other professionals. The consultations took place in schools and no local community members were involved in the steering group.

Whilst the draft toolkit provided a framework, the final toolkit needed a more flexible and responsive approach. Feedback from the Development Officer and the groups suggests that, although this approach was important to the success of the pilots, it might have been equally valid to facilitate clear target setting for the groups. This would have provided goals and targets for those groups that were particularly erratic and disorganised and would have increased accountability.

Building partnerships

The most successful pilots were ones that had actively pursued and established a broad partnership base. Blackpool's partnership included the Children's Fund, Barnardo's, active residents from the local estates and councillors. The partnership in Lincolnshire consisted of a childcare development agency, the youth service and the housing association. Building partnerships was easier where there was a strong champion in the pilot projects who had a good network.

Involvement of local authorities in the partnership was an advantage. Local authority officials could guide the steering group and provide useful information to support the project. The lack of involvement by local authority officials from the beginning meant the group in Liverpool found it more difficult to work with the local authority as the project developed. The involvement of local councillors was limited, with only Blackpool working with a local councillor. A lack of multi-agency commitment was identified as one of the contributing factors to slow progress in some of the pilots.

Additional activities

One aim of the toolkit project was to work with community groups to develop play spaces for children and young people. But, in the process, the different pilots organised other activities such as playschemes, after-school clubs, environmental projects and fun days in the local park. In Blackpool, as part of the ongoing business of the steering group, the community planned weekly play sessions alongside Blackpool and The Fylde College. They planned a mural project for the children and young people, and trips and visits to find out more about play. In York, the consultation event itself was part of a fun day organised for the community.

These activities maintained cohesion in the groups, interest in the toolkit process and helped build the groups' confidence because they created a sense of achievement. Some of the activities themselves had a direct impact on the reduction in complaints from adult community members because the children were participating in the activities organised by the community members.

Social, economic and environmental conditions

The neighbourhoods in which the pilot projects were located varied in their levels of deprivation and character. The Blackpool and Liverpool pilots probably had the highest levels of deprivation, characterised by poor facilities in the area, high transient population (in Blackpool) and low income and educational achievement. All the residents lived in social housing. The two estates in York varied from an old, established estate to a newer one with a mix of social and private housing. The project in Lincolnshire was led by a housing association which evidently meant the playgrounds being developed were in an area of social housing.

Possibly as a result of the social, economic and environmental factors facing some of the participants in the pilots, they initially lacked confidence and needed support from the Development Officer. In some cases, the groups were unfocused, suspicious of authorities and did not work well with partners. However, as they took part in the toolkit development project, their confidence grew and their capacity to deal with authorities increased and improved. This was evident in their capacity to bring considerable additional resources into their communities, pursue their vision and remain focused even when the Development Officer left.

Development of individuals

Initially, the groups lacked the skills and knowledge to lead the projects. Some groups were highly reactive, lacking any structure in their projects. Some lacked basic negotiation skills and were not able to run meetings in an orderly manner. In some projects there was a lack of co-ordination and as a result meetings were infrequent.

Through their participation in the pilots, the groups began to learn these skills. The participants in general became more proficient in the way they conducted meetings, no longer interrupting each other. They understood the importance of taking proper minutes, working with structures and campaigning more effectively for their neighbourhood.

Individuals grew in confidence. In the Blackpool project in particular, individuals took on roles such as secretary of the group and began to develop their skills and knowledge. They attended a variety of training courses such as First Aid and Health and Safety and through contacts with the Family Centre and Blackpool and The Flyde College, undertook training courses. One of these was the 'Through the eyes of the child' training programme which involved looking at play from a child's perspective.

Participants in Liverpool also increased their confidence while those in York became more active in local community affairs.

Quick hits

Most pilots benefited from 'quick hits'. Immediate improvements kept the momentum going in the projects, even if these improvements or changes were minor. Quick hits helped the group and the whole community stay positive and optimistic. They provided proof that changes could take place. Some pilots used their budgets to organise activities such as trips, arts projects and play sessions to retain interest and demonstrate visible progress.

Group dynamics

Initially some of the groups suffered from conflict between group members or conflict with individuals and agencies outside the group. Some of the groups faced many external pressures such as housing issues and dealing with benefits, education and youth services which all added stress internally within the groups.

But as they developed their vision, and as they began to see results, negative group dynamics developed into positive outcomes. At a wider community level, people of all different ages, particularly the older people and children, were encouraged to take part in the trips to improve dialogue, understanding and relationships between different generations. Within the steering groups, the champions had good understanding of group processes and ensured that even in times of conflict they maintained group cohesion.

Pilots coming together

A number of those taking part in the pilots would have welcomed the opportunity for all the pilot projects to come together to learn from each other and share experiences. They were all aware that other pilots were taking place, but they did not have an opportunity to meet. This would have galvanised the groups and increased their confidence further.

Consulting children and young people

All the projects agreed this was an important and essential aspect of the toolkit. The involvement of children and young people varied. In Lincolnshire, children were consulted in schools.

In Blackpool the consultations showed that the young people and children had very similar concerns to those of the older people in the area. This was an important finding to help build bridges and overcome the conflict between the two groups.

Blackpool set up a children's play focus group to support their project. They contracted an external agency that has a track record and is known for its participation work to set up this part of their project and recruit children and young people to it. The children were identified through the parents on the steering group and through local schools.

York maintained the involvement of children in the project primarily through a parent who brought her children to all the meetings.

The involvement of children and young people had to be carried out in an appropriate manner and the pilots recognised it was not possible for children and young people to take part in adult-orientated meetings. It was agreed that separate, more child-friendly meetings had to be held to encourage children and young people's participation.

Identifying other initiatives

The pilots advised that the toolkit should be a part of other initiatives in the local areas. If fun days are being organised by other agencies, then the members of the steering group should be a part of this. In Liverpool the steering group got involved in the development of the playground by the local authority. Multi-agency work ensured that information about other initiatives which the pilots could benefit from was shared.

Informing the toolkit

Throughout the time that the CPC Development Officer spent working with the pilot projects, learning to inform the toolkit and develop and test the materials was continuous. The final toolkit structure and content have been based on this learning, which is summarised in the Appendix.

5 Developing Best Value Indicators

Another major element of the work programme agreed with the funders was the development of Best Value Indicators for outdoor play. In 2005 the Children's Play Council developed this work with additional support from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The overarching aim of this work is to stimulate improved and increased provision for children's opportunities for free play within their local neighbourhoods by:

- recommending the most effective form of strategic indicators for play provision to be used by local authorities and their partners and by government departments and other agencies
- designing, testing and piloting strategic indicators for play provision for use across England while aiming to develop a consensus in the play and related sectors.

The indicators were to be linked to the potential contribution of local provision for play towards key government priorities:

- *DCMS Strategic Priority 1* (Children and young people): enhance access to culture and sport for children and give them the opportunity to develop their talents to the full and enjoy the benefits of participation.
- The outcomes in the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme:
 - being healthy
 - staying safe
 - enjoying and achieving
 - making a positive contribution
 - achieving economic well-being.

The purpose of the indicators is to provide a means of assessing local performance in providing for a range of appropriate play opportunities for children and young people.

The draft indicators developed in autumn 2005, in wide consultation with the play and related sectors, cover the amount children play out, the access they have to different types of play space and facility, their satisfaction with play provision on offer and the quality of that provision.

These draft indicators are currently being piloted and it is hoped that at least one will be used in future Comprehensive Performance Assessment. The other indicators will be developed as part of a 'basket of local indicators' for use by local authorities.

6 Conclusion

The toolkit provided a structure and a framework for all the pilots to work through. This was identified as an important condition for the groups coming together. The initial draft toolkit was the development of a process that followed a staged approach. In reality, the process required both a structured *and* flexible, responsive approach. Responding to unexpected events was vital not only to help reach the identified outcomes, but also to create new opportunities. This was one of the most important lessons learnt in the project. The need to identify strong champions and project leaders was another critical factor in the success of the projects.

The groups recruited varied in their levels of confidence and some needed more support than others. Some lacked basic skills such as organising and running meetings. Through their participation in the pilots, everyone increased their skills, confidence and knowledge and, in the end, all the groups made achievements, some bringing substantial additional resources into their communities.

Attention to the *process* was judged to be as important as attention to the outcomes. Indeed, without proper attention to the process, the possibility of achieving the desired outcomes – specifically, developing play opportunities for children – would have been reduced.

The toolkit began a journey for which it was difficult to identify an end. Each of the groups is now engaged in a continual process of development. The toolkit project has produced some direct, observable achievements such as the development of new play areas, playschemes for children, mobile play opportunities and funding for a new community centre. Some of the more indirect outcomes have been:

- increased confidence in the individuals and groups who took part
- greater cohesion in communities
- less conflict, particularly between different generations
- increased skills and knowledge in the groups
- more partnerships between agencies.

Participants said:

It was a really good experience and enabled us to look at things differently.

It was a privilege to be given this chance and it gave us a push to change things.

It provided a way of shared understanding of issues of involving children and brought the most successes in terms of us using their ideas to develop environmental/ecological elements in our neighbourhood play initiative.

The envisaged outcomes for the toolkit were that it should be comprehensive, age-sensitive, participative, user-friendly and inclusive. Those involved judge that it has reached most of the project aims and objectives. In addition, the toolkit has been a valuable, enriching experience for most of those involved and a good learning opportunity for everyone.

Appendix: Translating the learning from the pilots into the toolkit materials – voices of those who took part in the neighbourhood Play Toolkit project

Getting started/steering groups

In one pilot, the main agency involved in the project was also involved in delivering many of the services in the area, e.g. early years, parks and gardens and community development. This meant that a multi-agency approach was not adopted, although there was some involvement of the local youth service.

We followed the principles of getting people involved and engaging community members. We did this:

- by publicising the meetings through a quarterly bulletin, which goes out to all households in the neighbourhood
- through the local Community Development Officer who had individual contacts with local community members.

The first meeting, held in April, was attended by 30 people. At this meeting a large map was presented to the group. The map was the catalyst for discussion about the various issues regarding play and use of outdoor space by the whole community.

A second meeting, held in May, was set up to discuss further how to generally improve play opportunities for children and young people in the area. This was another promising meeting. A large group of young skaters also attended the meeting.

The third meeting, held in June, was a planning meeting, attended by about ten people. The purpose of this meeting was to establish a plan for the project. One of the outcomes of the meeting was the decision to hold an open consultation event in August for the whole community. The Community Development Officer and the toolkit Development Officer wanted to hold a large fun day on the local green at the centre of the village. However, the community group was clear and realistic about what was achievable on the day and how much they could contribute. In the end, it was agreed to hold a consultation event only. There was a great deal of enthusiasm for this and a number of people volunteered to help with it.

The group continued to meet once a fortnight to plan the consultation event and to discuss further the issues of children and young people's opportunities for play.

On the day of the consultation event, held in August, only one volunteer and her two children turned up to help; it is unclear why no one arrived.

The lack of involvement continued for the next few meetings. It was time for a review. In their evaluations, community members said they had enjoyed the process and would take part if they had more time. The Community Development Officer and the toolkit Development Officer met to evaluate and assess progress and the reasons for the lack of involvement by community members. Things would have to be done differently if the project was to continue.

Message for the toolkit

- Sometimes people just drop out (even if they are positive about the project) and it is difficult to know why.

Having a champion or facilitator

The most successful pilots were those where the project had strong champions and facilitators.

The role of the champion was to look for funding opportunities and ways of strengthening the steering group and the project as a whole. This person often had a wider knowledge of what was happening, the relationships and useful contacts in the area. They looked for opportunities to network and promote the project. The lead person was a key contact and resource both for the steering group and the toolkit Development Officer. The champion also had the authority to influence relationships between agencies and bring together different initiatives and resources.

While it was not necessary, the pilots found it was very useful to identify local authority champions, because they had access to the various local authority resources, understood the protocols and were in a stronger position of authority to influence change. However, the champions may work outside the statutory sector, for example in housing associations, or could be council members.

In the pilots where a champion was not present, there were difficulties in moving the project forward, identifying and sharing resources and working in partnership with other agencies to reach the same goals. There was also a lack of communication between different agencies which resulted in isolated developments and duplication of projects and parallel initiatives.

The facilitator was at hand to support the processes, for example enabling the active involvement of community members on the steering group through support, information and advice. They provided the practical back-up and resources the steering group needed, which enabled the champion to have more time to network and build relationships between different agencies.

The most successful projects were those where the champion and the facilitator understood about community development.

Messages for the toolkit

- Identify lead champions who have significant authority to enable the project's development.
- Identify a facilitator who can provide practical support, help and advice to the community members.
- Both the champion and the facilitator must have knowledge and understanding of community development.

Involving the local authority

In one area, the pilot group was an already established group of community members who had been working together for approximately eight years to create suitable play opportunities for children.

While they had knowledge of local authority structures and were aware of who needed to be involved in the toolkit pilot, these local authority officers were not involved right from the beginning of the project. Local authority involvement has been at times of crises rather than throughout the whole process of building play opportunities. The perception is that this means it is now difficult to engage them because they assume the development work is being carried out by the community

groups. As a result of their lack of involvement, a separate playground development was being carried out by the local authority with no reference to the steering group. Consultations that did take place did not consider the work of the steering group.

Messages for the toolkit

- Clearly identify your partners and make sure they are involved in the steering group right from the beginning.
- Make sure you have local authority involvement to strengthen your steering group to give it recognition and avoid duplication.

Developing strong partnerships

In one area, some funding had been secured by the local Children's Fund to develop play opportunities on the estate. This enabled professionals to come together to form a steering group which was a subgroup of another multi-agency group. One of the members of the steering group represented Family Services. Through their user contacts, community members were invited to join the steering group. While initially they lacked confidence, soon the group was asking questions about the process and about the outcome. They came with a list of questions about how they would be supported to reach the outcomes and the project processes. Fortunately, there were individuals in this group who had the confidence to ask these questions.

The funding, through which the community members could access training opportunities, meant the level of interest in the project was sustained. This, coupled with a good level of support from the Children's Fund community development worker, has meant that the group has been kept engaged. The group felt the partnership was healthy, with opportunities to have their views heard and acted on.

The group has been business minded and task orientated. They have been concerned with practical outcomes and solutions.

Messages for the toolkit

- Having funding available for quick hits can consolidate a group and create a sense of purpose and ownership.

- A good multi-agency approach with key professionals conversant and skilled in community development can engage community groups and keep them involved.

Getting children and young people involved

The same pilot set up a children's play focus group to support their project. They contracted an external agency that has a track record and is known for its participation work to set up this part of their project and recruit children and young people to it. The children were identified through the parents on the steering group and through local schools. The children's play focus group met a number of times. The children talked about things they would like to change in their area to help them play. They also compiled a list of things they wanted the adult steering group to consider in partnership with themselves.

Message for the toolkit

- Set up a separate children's participation group, but make sure that group is an integral part of the adult steering group.

In another pilot, the development workers identified gaps in provision through the play audit. There was a need to update an existing playground with new play equipment for a wider age range and develop communal play opportunities, although not fixed-equipment playgrounds, for children on one side of the community.

This pilot lacked community involvement in the project itself so the development workers explored how the community could be involved and their views reflected in these new developments. They agreed that children should be the main focus for these consultations because children traditionally had little say in the area and were often seen as problematic. Their views were often sought through their parents rather than directly from themselves. The development workers also agreed that the children would then carry out consultations with adults. This would provide opportunities for children and adults to work together and create a sense of belonging to the community.

To consult with children, the development workers created a programme of activities which included visits to different types of play areas, model making and discussions with the playground maintenance team. Their main aim was to demonstrate that children need to play, that there are different ways in which they play and that their views are critical to the development of successful play areas.

Message for the toolkit

- Be creative in how children are consulted and involved and recognise that children can be the centre of the consultation process rather than adults.

Action planning

In one of the pilots the group action planned at each session and identified their targets and actions to achieve their end goals. However, this was never implemented thoroughly because the steering group seemed to be responding to constant crises between each meeting. For example, one group had agreed to lead on the development of the outdoor play space at one meeting, and at the second meeting had withdrawn that offer. Also, the local authority decided to build a new playground nearby without consulting the steering group. The steering group was then distracted from its action plan because it got involved in the community consultations for the new playground. Individuals were dealing with sickness and the ill health of relatives which meant the continuity was broken.

Message for the toolkit

- It is important to keep sight of your action plan to achieve results and to be flexible to respond to external, unexpected events.

The steering group in another pilot area wrote a yearly action plan. Community members identified key issues that needed addressing and the plan was written in detail by the lead community development worker. The action plan is regularly assessed by the steering group members. While it was not a time-specific action plan i.e. no dates were identified by when specific actions would happen, the action plan provided a valuable guide and reference point for how far the projects had progressed.

Message for the toolkit

- Action plans provide a measurement of tangible results, which encourages the steering group to continue the development of new projects.

In a third pilot, the development workers wrote action plans for themselves because of the lack of involvement of community members. These action plans were time-

specific to make sure the project remained on course. In these action plans, the development workers identified when individual projects should be completed, e.g. completing the play audit, running consultation sessions with children and young people and disseminating information that had been previously asked for by those initially involved in the project. The action plan therefore became a tool specifically for the development workers rather than one for the whole community.

Message for the toolkit

- Write an action plan, irrespective of the size of the steering group. Give yourself time-limited objectives in order to keep the momentum going and to provide focus.

Play mapping

In one area, the Community Development Officer and the play toolkit Development Officer mapped and assessed all the play provision in the village using photography and maps obtained from the estate office. From the mapping exercise, the officers discovered the gaps in provision previously identified by the community were indeed a reality. From this, they were able to make recommendations about what the play project could achieve and identified other issues that needed to be addressed.

Message for the toolkit

- Mapping of outdoor play provision can be useful in building the case for new provision, avoiding duplication and highlighting issues such as the need for mediation and the development of a playgrounds strategy.

Establishing land ownership

Because of the lack of local authority involvement in one pilot, the links with the department (leisure services) who owned the land were weak. This had meant the steering group did not have the support of the landowners to implement any aspects of its development plan such as laying down new pathways in the area. So, while the steering group could make a number of recommendations and develop its own

action plan, without the agreement of the landowner the plans could not be implemented. In this example, another part of the council (parks) had decided to develop its own play space in the area because they did not have responsibility for providing outdoor play equipment. There were no links between the parks department and the steering group.

Message for toolkit

- Keep the landowners informed and involved in your project. Without their agreement, the development of an outdoor play space will be severely restricted.

Keeping people interested

As part of the ongoing business of one of the steering groups, the community had planned play sessions alongside a local college. These would be running weekly. The community had also planned a mural project and children and young people had designed a mural near the play area. They were also going on trips and visits to find out more about play. People of all different ages, particularly the older people and children, were encouraged to take part in the trips to improve dialogue, understanding and relationships between different generations.

The community members were using their budget to deliver activities so that the momentum continued and changes were visible.

They also linked into many other initiatives such as the Children's Fund, Better Play, Area Forum and other key agencies providing services to children, young people and families, such as Barnardo's. This meant that anyone who had plans to do anything with children, young people and their families brought them to the steering group. All the local agencies knew what was going on and could complement services.

The role of the lead person was critical to strengthening the role of the steering group so that it had wider recognition. Sometimes it seemed that the steering group was tackling issues that went beyond its play remit. However, there was a recognition that, in order to increase children's play opportunities, other partnerships and activities were necessary. For example, the steering group members initiated the refurbishment of the local day centre, which was used primarily by the over-sixties group. The centre was unattractive to other users. The steering group members consulted with the existing users about the refurbishment. They also persuaded the users to display children's

work on the walls. This was a breakthrough in the way the centre would now be perceived, i.e. it was open to all, especially children. The centre now runs regular activities for children and continues to run sessions for the over-sixties group.

Messages for the toolkit

- Use different, seemingly separate initiatives in your area to help 'glue' projects together and so increase play opportunities for children.
- Consider how play (both supervised and unsupervised) can build communities, bring people together and share resources.

In this same area, a member of staff from the Children's Fund was asked to support the community members on the steering group. Her role was to be available when needed by the community members: for example, attending meetings with community members between steering group meetings, enabling them to access local training opportunities, talking through queries and problems and providing telephone support and advice.

The worker spent on average one day a week supporting the group. But this support enabled the group to gain confidence and learn how to problem-solve. It also meant that crises could be dealt with as they occurred and so no steering group members dropped out because of unresolved issues.

Messages for the toolkit

- Ensure that community members who are getting involved in the group have access to help, advice and support at all times.
- Look at various options for how this support can be given, for example through partner agencies involved in the steering group.

Steering group members, through their participation on the pilot projects, had accessed a variety of training such as 'Take 5 for Play', committee skills training, fire safety, food hygiene and finance. In his annual presentation to a funding organisation, one community member described how getting his certificate was a milestone in his own life and a key influence in his continuing involvement in the group.

Message for the toolkit

- Provide plenty of opportunities for training and development so that people remain involved, increase their self-esteem and continue to be activists for play in the community.

The initial agenda at the first few steering group meetings was, simply, 'How can we increase play opportunities for children?' From this question came a number of initiatives. The process highlighted the importance of remaining proactive. The group set themselves up to initiate changes and make things happen, not just to respond to crises. The group was able to plan and explore alternatives so that they could respond positively and from a position of strength should the need to be reactive occur.

The other benefit of being proactive was that children and their well-being were the central concerns of the group. The project was not developed to respond to prevalent perceptions of children as a nuisance and anti-social. Indeed this was hardly discussed as an issue.

Message for the toolkit

- Stay proactive and focused on long-term outcomes. Drawing up a strategy can enable the group to predict and deal with potential crises before they happen.

One pilot project consulted children and young people at their local schools on the use and design of play areas. However, at this stage no funding had been secured and the children were not provided with any guidelines in coming up with their designs. They were set no boundaries or given additional information such as seeing pictures of play equipment. Five winners were identified from the design competition, but none of the designs was implemented because of the lack of funding.

Message for the toolkit

- Keep the consultation 'real'. Don't ask children, young people or adults about their views on a project that has little chance of materialising or raise false expectations.

