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Research, Evidence and Evaluation Department

NCB’s Research, Evidence and Evaluation department produces high quality research and evaluations supporting policy and practice development for children and young people. Our wide ranging work is based on NCB’s aims and principles, and spans the policy and practice work of NCB and includes work on early years, youth and the range of contexts children and young people develop in. We often work in partnership with NCB colleagues, other voluntary sector and research organisations and academic departments. We design and carry out both large-scale and small-scale studies using a range of methods. We have expertise in qualitative research, quantitative research, evaluation, reviews, and involving children and young people in research.

Our unique offer lies in:

- our expertise in involving young people in research and evaluation
- extensive experience of evaluating children and young people’s services across all sectors
- ability to work from the perspective of the ‘whole child’
- proximity to an unrivalled range of policy and practice experts
- access, through NCB’s membership and networks, to thousands of people who work with and for children and young people.

About the authors

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Background

Play England commissioned the Research, Evidence and Evaluation department of NCB, in 2006, to undertake an evaluation of the Play England Project. This report provides a summary of the findings from the four years of the evaluation.

Play England was established, as a new department of NCB, to deliver the aims of the former Children's Play Council (CPC), an alliance of national agencies and local authorities promoting children's right to play. CPC adopted a five-year strategic plan in 2005, which formed the basis of a major lottery bid made on its behalf by NCB, the lead partner in the alliance. Central to this plan was the establishment of an infrastructure body for the children's play sector with sufficient capacity to work regionally as well as nationally towards CPC's newly defined strategic aims.

In February 2006, the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) awarded CPC, through NCB, a grant of £15.13 million over five years for the Play England Project. This grant was to provide strategic enabling and support services for applicants to a new children's play funding programme; and establish a support and development structure for the strategic growth of play provision and opportunities in England. Play England was launched as part of NCB in April 2006 and, in November 2007, CPC adopted a new membership structure and changed its name to the Play England Council.

In April 2008, Play England was successful in its bid to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to deliver project services and support to those local authorities in receipt of funding from the £235 million capital programme, underpinning The Play Strategy for England1, as well as to challenge these local authorities to deliver their plans. Play England is also delivering the Play Shaper cross-professional training programme funded by DCSF, alongside SkillsActive and Playwork Partnerships; and has contracts with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department of Health (DH).

Play England Project outcomes

The overall evaluation framework of the Play England Project is structured around the four strategic outcomes that form the basis of the grant from BIG. These outcomes are as follows:

1. A sustainable and effective regional support and development structure for the children's play sector in England.

2. The widespread recognition and adoption of good practice, and the advancement of innovative practice in specific areas of children's play provision – planning, design and delivery.

3. The sustainable strategic development of play provision as a free service to children and young people.

4. A long-term positive change in attitude in local authorities and other agencies about the importance, value and status of children's play and its provision.

A fifth 'outcome' was adopted after the grant was awarded, and also forms part of the evaluation framework:

5. Play England is demonstrably cost-effective, efficient, transparent, responsive to its constituents, and delivers on its plans.
**The Play England operational plan and structure**

The Play England Project, designed to achieve the strategic outcomes, is delivered through an operational plan and an organisational structure. These allocate resources to: regional operations; a policy and research team; a communications and campaigns team; and a business support team.

- **Regional operations** comprise nine regional offices, co-terminus with the government office regions, offering support and development services, advice and guidance, and networking activities directly to local authorities and their play partnerships, with the aim of raising the profile and status of play within local government. Specifically, the regional teams were tasked with supporting the development and implementation of crosscutting local play strategies, required by BIG in support of funding applications to the Children's Play Programme. Subsequently, the regional teams are delivering the 'support and challenge' service to local authorities, part of Play England's role as national delivery partner for the Play Strategy.

- **The policy and research team** conducts and commissions play research, responds to national policy consultations, develops and disseminates wide-ranging policy briefings, and gathers an evidence base to inform proposals for national play policy.

- **The national practice team** delivers national programmes to encourage the adoption of good practice in play provision, including adventure play; inclusive play; community engagement in play; and the Quality in Play quality assurance scheme.

- **A communications and campaigns team** produces and publishes policy and research documents and develops campaign messages for dissemination via a range of media and events, to raise awareness of the importance of play and to win support for policy proposals.

- **A business support team** develops and implements the finance, planning, monitoring and performance management systems designed to ensure effective organisational practice, reporting and management control.

Note that the policy and research department was expanded to include practice development in mid-2008, to deliver elements of the DCSF support and challenge contract.
Evaluation methodology

The methodology for this evaluation involved the:

• identification of quantitative outcome measures and data collection requirements and the establishment of baselines, analysis and interpretation

• analysis of monitoring data on the delivery of internal activities and milestones, primarily related to output measurement

• qualitative assessment of the perceived value and impact of Play England activities; and the identification of enablers and inhibitors to progress through surveys, interviews with key stakeholders and feedback material

• use of case study illustrations of the impact of Play England on the development of effective and sustainable play policies and strategies at local, regional and national levels; and of particular play initiatives enabled or supported as a result of this activity.

To date, data were collected from Play England staff and members; local, regional and national stakeholders; and lead officers, practitioners, partners, children and young people, in a sample of 18 local authority case study areas. Around 360 interviews, four local authority surveys, one members’ survey and one stakeholder survey have been completed.

Impact and effectiveness

This subsection of the report provides an overview of the effectiveness of Play England at national level, through the regional operations and internally with regards to project management and delivery.

Nationally

At the end of year one, managers felt that Play England had secured a stronger focus for play in national policy initiatives, including in School Grounds for the Future, Youth Matters, and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) Physical Activity Guidance. Staff were developing play performance indicators with the Audit Commission and DCMS and believed that central government was taking play more seriously, at least partly as a result of the growth in strategic activity locally and the effectiveness of Play England’s campaigning and influencing activities nationally.

During year two, staff and stakeholders felt Play England’s dialogue with central government was increasingly productive. A survey of its Council members in November 2007 found that 68 per cent believed Play England had a ‘good’ or ‘great’ level of influence on national policy-making. In 2008, the introduction of a £235 million funding package and national strategy for play led staff and some stakeholders to say that Play England’s work in this area (developing the content, policy objectives and supporting documents) exceeded expectations and showed that the government held Play England in high regard. In 2009, the view regarding Play England’s high standing with national government remained, partly due to their effectiveness as national delivery partner for the national play strategy. Good in-roads were felt to have been made in wider policy areas, namely play in schools and planning.
National indicator 199 (children and young people's satisfaction with parks and play areas) now features in the national indicator set, after Play England recommended such a measure as a means of encouraging local authorities to take play provision more seriously.

Play England’s resources have influenced local policies and practice across England. More than half of the respondents to the first local authority survey (July 2007) reported that *PlayToday* and *Children’s Play Update* had ‘some influence’ on play policies at local level (56 per cent and 54 per cent respectively). A further 10 per cent felt the documents had ‘considerable influence’ at local level. The second survey (January 2008) showed an increase in the proportion of authorities using these and reporting them to be useful. In year three, *Design for Play and Managing Risk in Play Provision* were said by stakeholders to be the most frequently requested government publications. Around nine out of ten local authorities that responded to the third survey (January 2009) felt Play England’s guidance had ‘some influence’ or ‘considerable influence’ (44 per cent and 47 per cent respectively) on local policies and guidance relating to play. In year four this trend continued, with the local authority survey showing that 97 per cent of respondents believe that guidance had ‘considerable’ or ‘some’ influence (60 and 37 per cent respectively). However, improving the general public’s attitudes towards play was believed to be an ongoing challenge; and stakeholders widely felt that Play England should seek to influence parents and schools specifically.

Year four saw significant developments in the rollout of the national practice programmes. At the end of 2009, Play Shaper had been piloted and reviewed, specific modules developed for planners and the police, and 30 enablers trained to deliver training across England. KIDS (the disabled children’s charity) was working with local authorities around mainstreaming inclusive play; and the Community Play Programme had launched its *Neighbourhood Play Toolkit*. Awareness of the latter was fairly low amongst local authorities responding to the survey, but the support and advice delivered across all three was felt to be effective.

At the mid-year point in year three, Play England had exceeded its target of 150 members by reaching a total of 181 (and had received over 230 applications), which several managers considered to be a real vote of confidence. By the end of that year, the membership had increased to 246. In year four, membership was felt to have reached a plateau. It was felt that undertaking a further push to increase membership would improve Play England’s ability to be responsive to the play sector.

Playday 2009 was the most successful in its 20-year history. A total of 834 events were recorded, building on 2008’s success of 550 events and 2007’s 300.

**Regional operations**

Analysis of regional monitoring data and the first local authority survey in year one showed that Play England supported over 90 per cent of local authorities to develop play strategies. Regional managers said that the extent to which regional teams were able to provide effective support depended on the size and geography of the region, and the presence or absence of senior leadership for play strategies in each local authority.

During year two, Play England continued to support nine out of ten local authorities. Interviews with lead officers, practitioners and partners in the case study areas found
they accessed a broad range of support. Often, a combination of different types of support that could be drawn on at various stages in the planning process was found to be most helpful. By the end of the year, 95 per cent had successfully drawn down Children’s Play Programme funding. After some initial concerns, regional managers were generally pleased with the quality of local play strategies. Nine out of ten local authorities that received support in July 2007 felt that Play England had helped to improve the quality of their play strategies. In January 2008, a second survey among local authorities found that more than half (53 per cent) felt Play England’s support increased their capacity to plan for the programme ‘somewhat’; and 30 per cent felt the support had ‘greatly’ increased their capacity.

Play England maintained contact with most local authorities in year three. For some, particularly top-tier local authorities, support increased under the DCSF programme, whilst others reported less contact. Across the case studies, local authorities welcomed Play England’s presence and support, but the extent to which it was useful often depended on the local context for play and when the support was received. The county network meetings were considered helpful for peer support, local updates and feedback. Play England’s newsletters and publications were said to be most useful in demonstrating and sharing good practice. Almost three-quarters of local authorities in receipt of DCSF funding reported that Play England’s support had increased their capacity to plan for the programme (74 per cent).

By year four, all top-tier local authorities were in receipt of DCSF Playbuilder or Play Pathfinder funding. Play England continued to support and challenge local authorities, attend play partnership meetings, support public consultations and monitor progress locally. The local authority survey suggested that Play England had improved its allocation of support to district and county authorities, yet in the case studies it emerged that those from district authorities often only came into contact with Play England directly through partnership meetings at county level. Face-to-face support was said to be most useful in year four and the amount received by survey respondents was fairly consistent with year three (60 per cent and 61 per cent respectively), and demonstrated an increase since year two (52 per cent). Overall, 98 per cent of survey respondents felt that Play England had been effective or very effective in supporting their local authority to develop play.

During year one, there were few opportunities to influence regional policy developments because of a strong focus on work with local authorities. In year two, interviews with regional managers found some evidence of Play England’s involvement in joint events, contributions to regional strategies, plans and guidance (for example, health and well-being, spatial and cultural strategies).

In year three there were few new regional contacts, this time because of the regional teams’ focus on the DCSF programme, and several stakeholders reported that contact with Play England had ceased or reduced. Lack of contact did not appear to have had particularly adverse effects for the individuals involved; and all said that they were able to continue without any problems. Although in one case, the profile for play in the region was said to have decreased since the contact ended. But most said their contact with Play England was useful. Awareness of Play England increased as a result of strong links with regional government offices. Regional teams were more frequently invited than in previous years to attend meetings and comment on consultations around health, well-being and governance, for example. Some considered it too early to see the impact of its regional partnership and influencing work.
Year four saw the further development of networks to support local authorities in implementing DCSF-funded capital-build programmes – though these were said to be less relevant for some, who felt that new authorities joining the network meant covering old ground. Infrastructure continued to vary across the regions of the country, with some regions seeming strong and independent with members working together on a defined purpose; while others were less well-developed and remained dependent at this stage on the coordination and facilitation of Play England. Interviewees suggested that more networks could be set up to support playworkers. Some new or developing relationships were also evident at regional level in year four. Relationships involved: the specific funding of Play England to carry out projects; consulting Play England around play and other policies; the staging of joint events; and being part of networks hosted by other regional agencies including government offices.

Project management and delivery

From 1 April 2006 to 31 December 2009, Play England grew from 5 to 67 staff. Positively, managers highlighted strengths in the skills, experience and commitment of staff at the end of year one. There was a general consensus the next year that the team had greatly expanded in a short time whilst maintaining a good standard of work. But capacity to deliver, particularly in some regions, was a concern; and staff turnover in year three caused some disruption. Capacity was remedied to some degree in year four through additional recruitment in the regions. However, staff continued to be fully stretched due to supporting an increased number of top-tier authorities and integrating the implementation of the national programmes. Throughout the evaluation, staff motivation, enthusiasm and commitment has been identified as a key enabling factor.

In year three there was a perception that the latest changes to the management structure (the creation of a new senior management group and respective teams10) needed time to settle. The benefits started to emerge in year four but it was thought that more time would allow the effects to trickle through the organisation. The new structure was said to bring the delivery and support functions of the organisation closer together and improve senior-level decision making. Overall, the aim was to develop a stronger and more ‘inclusive’ organisation with a view to possibly moving towards becoming an independent organisation in 2011.

Whilst staffing was a key strength, challenges throughout were most commonly associated with establishing and adapting systems and allocating management resources to meet changing needs. Key learning points from year one included the need to: consolidate and stabilise processes to enable greater focus on outcomes; allow for longer lead-in times to help in planning ahead; establish appropriate levels of reporting; and strengthen relationships between central and regional offices. Despite improvements, these challenges remained by the end of year three. Year four saw concerted efforts to strengthen relationships between the centre and the regions, through involving regional managers in central working groups and through representation from the regions at meetings previously only attended by central managers.

There was a perception in year three that the new DCSF contract, although welcome, had come too soon. Staff felt that they had insufficient time to reflect and make internal adjustments to manage new workloads. However, greater use of the Practical
Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations (PQASSO) and the creation of a PQASSO steering group did support delivery. Feedback in year four suggested that there were no pressing changes needed to staff policies, other than that they be refreshed with staff; and that a specific Play England equalities and diversity strategy (as distinct from NCB's) was in the early stages of development.

The introduction of full management meetings in year two enabled regional managers to contribute to business planning and develop a common approach to their work. But regular and frequent management meetings suffered, at points in year three, due to staff turnover and a busy workload. This pressure continued in year four, as priority given to funders’ requests could at times be at the expense of support to staff. Managers generally welcomed improvements to the performance management system in year three; but there were ongoing challenges associated with being consistent across the regions and in the large number of forms used to collect and record data. The main monitoring form did not capture all activities because of prolonged contract negotiations with the DCSF. By year four, the milestones and budget monitoring and financial forecasting functions had been combined into one template – said to be complex but better at meeting the needs of Play England and funders. Staff taking the leap to adopt the system was appreciated centrally.

Several managers believed the BIG and DCSF work plans were complementary but, in the regions, DCSF-related work took more time than anticipated. There were mixed views on the extent to which Play England was delivering a cohesive and well-coordinated service to local authorities; some said the ‘challenge’ aspect of the new role meant Play England no longer offered a seamless service. Work was ongoing to promote cohesive policy for play and, where local authorities were engaged, it was working well. In year four there were some specific examples within the case studies of support delivered to local authorities that helped them work together more effectively – both at a regional level, and between district and county levels.

Moving towards a sustainable structure for play

This subsection of the report provides an overview of the indirect outcomes of Play England’s work, resulting from the development and implementation of local play strategies, which Play England supported local authorities in developing, and the delivery of BIG and DCSF play programmes. As previously highlighted, Play England maintained contact with most local authorities in year four and continued to provide enabling, support and challenge services.

Progress with the play programmes

In year four, of the local authorities in receipt of Children’s Play Programme funding that responded to the online survey, 90 per cent felt they were on target. Likewise, around nine out of ten authorities receiving Play Pathfinder or Playbuilder funding said they were on target also (94 per cent and 92 per cent respectively). The survey in year four showed a slight decline in play partnership activity; 85 per cent of play partnerships were active in some form (down from 92 per cent in year 3), in some cases due to local authorities' current focus on delivering DCSF funded projects. One in four (25 per cent) reported a decline in activity compared with 20 per cent in year three and 30 per cent in year two. All case studies reported seeking to engage communities, children and
young people in the design and delivery of play provision. Often children participated at project rather than strategic level and it was generally felt to be easier to engage children and young people than adults. In year three, the most common form of monitoring involved the recording of ‘play hours’, though in year four, the survey found that it was through consultation with children and young people.

**Impact at local level**

The process of planning for the Children’s Play Programme helped local authorities prepare for the DCSF programme; and case study interviewees believed it had many positive outcomes, particularly in relation to inter-departmental working. The process raised the profile of play; encouraged a broader understanding of play; improved relations between county and district councils, districts and parishes; built on established links with the voluntary sector; and, to a lesser extent, facilitated links with other agencies.

Local play strategies in the case study areas were felt to have had the greatest impact on positive outcomes for children, young people and families. Year three feedback highlighted that children were given a voice in local decision-making, developed new skills (e.g. planning, building and creative) and gained in confidence. The strategies and associated project portfolios introduced more good quality safe and inclusive play opportunities. In so doing, they were said to have reduced anti-social behaviour, strengthened communities and increased residents’ respect for local areas.

Respondents to the fourth survey in November 2009 were asked what had been achieved to date through the Children’s Play Programme and the DCSF-funded programmes. Overall, raising the profile of play, and increasing the quality and number of local play opportunities were most commonly thought to have been achieved.

**Table 1: What has been achieved through the Children’s Play Programme to date (n=121)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What has been achieved</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased the number of children and young people accessing local play opportunities</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved the quality of free open access play opportunities</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised the profile of play</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: What has been achieved through the Playbuilder/Play Pathfinder programme (n=131)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What has been achieved</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raised the profile of play</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved the quality of free open access play opportunities</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved local authority’s attitudes about play</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved inter departmental working</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of embedding play, case study interviewees reported more links with related strategies. The fourth local authority survey found the most common of these related
strategies were: children and young people’s plans; open space audits and strategies; and community strategies. Overall though, this showed some decline from year three, most likely due to an increased number of top-tier authorities, for whom play provision is effectively a new policy area, taking part in the survey.

**Figure 1: References to play in other local strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year four survey</th>
<th>Year three survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children and Young People’s Plans</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open space audits and strategies</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community strategies</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Local authority survey sample size: year four n= 149; year three n= 163

The majority of authorities surveyed in year three (62 per cent) were planning to implement aspects of the national play strategy from April 2009, for example, through linking its objectives to other strategies. In year four, for 82 per cent of survey respondents the national play strategy had had ‘some’ or ‘considerable’ influence on their local play strategy (60 and 22 per cent respectively).

**Sustainability and mainstreaming**

Interviewees were asked about sustainability for the first time during year two. Having come from different starting points, managers’ perceptions about the effectiveness of regional play infrastructures varied. All highlighted a need to maintain momentum at a local level and build on regional influencing of activities in the future. In year three, just over half (55 per cent) of local authorities surveyed believed that the infrastructure for play in their region was sustainable. This dropped slightly in year four (to 48 per cent), with more people saying they were ‘unsure’. The main threat to sustainability emerged as being the recession, anticipated public spending cuts and a potential change in government. In general, local authorities planned to maintain fixed play areas using existing or newly negotiated maintenance budgets. However, there were concerns that the capital programmes did not allow for the ‘maintenance, care and control’ of sites and there were particular concerns about the sustainability of revenue funded play projects. At a local level, there were a few examples of mainstreaming; several areas appointed new play staff where they had had none previously; and in one case a play ranger service was mainstreamed. Nationally, *The Play Strategy* for England, a range of supporting publications, Play Shaper training, and play indicators were said to be the main ways by which play was being mainstreamed. Case studies in year four showed that ideas, knowledge and practice gained through the process of developing play, which were influenced by Play England, were the most sustainable elements.
Progress in meeting outcomes

With reference to managers’ ratings (on a scale of 1–10), until year four most progress was believed to have been made towards overall outcome one – a sustainable and effective regional support and development structure for the children’s play sector in England. In particular, towards the penultimate and long-term stages of the outcomes through Play England’s work in the regions and the agreement in principle to become independent beyond 2011 (see Possible changes to Play England’s governance below). The effectiveness of the regional infrastructure was thought to be high in year four, however growth in concern regarding sustainability in the light of the current economic climate and spending cuts reduced confidence in progressing towards this long-term outcome.

Steady progress was made in relation to outcome two (the widespread recognition and adoption of good practice and the advancement of innovative practice in specific areas of children’s play provision – planning, design and delivery). There was a perception through years three and four that new government funding and programmes, and Design for Play, were significant in moving towards achievement of the widespread recognition and adoption of good practice, as was Managing Risk in Play Provision. These, alongside Play Shaper and the good practice examples on the website, were identified as mechanisms for change when developing the evaluation framework. The adoption of nationally recognised standards, quality assessment tools and use of evidence to develop and improve work are also mechanisms for change.

In moving towards achievement of outcome three (the sustainable strategic development of play provision as a free service to children and young people), good progress was believed to have been made in year three, especially in terms of increasing the amount of free play provision, a government lead, and national strategy for play; the latter identified as the mechanism for change in achieving this long-term outcome. This continued in year four, with further capital build projects being completed and play strategies being developed within more top-tier authorities. However, as outlined above, concerns that funding cuts might limit the sustainability and mainstreaming of play locally, prevented more progress being made towards the long-term outcome.

Up until year four, interviewees felt least progress was made against overall outcome four (a long-term positive change in attitude in local authorities and other agencies about the importance, value and status of children’s play and its provision) indicating perhaps that the national priority now afforded to play is not yet widely shared by local authorities beyond the take-up of allocated funding. There remained a belief that awareness about the importance of play should be pushed with wider audiences (including teachers and parents), however implementation of Play Shaper and the capital-build project were felt to have gathered momentum in year four.

The interviews highlighted the ongoing success of Playday (growing from 300 to 834 events between 2007 and 2009), the introduction of national indicator 199, and Play Pathfinders and Playbuilders, all of which they felt facilitated a long-term positive change in attitude by ‘moving play up the agenda’. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of respondents to the year four local authority survey agreed that local play strategies have improved local authorities’ attitudes towards play and 84 per cent said that it had raised the profile of play.

The annual survey in year four also asked respondents what is most important for Play England to do to support local authorities and their partners to deliver more, better and sustainable play opportunities for children and young people in the future.
Respondents’ top priorities were ‘supporting local authorities and partners to embed play in local strategic structures’ (35 per cent) and ‘promoting the importance of play to local policy-makers’ (29 per cent). These priorities remained constant from findings in year three (38 per cent and 21 per cent respectively).

Overall, Play England staff shared a perception that Play England was responding effectively to needs within capacity and several believed it offered value for money. There was a suggestion that Play England could improve their efficiency by developing shared project management approaches and improving support between the central and regional teams.

**Implications going forward**

Year four saw an increase in internal focus for Play England over previous years. The bedding in of the new management structure, together with increased cross-departmental links in central working groups, were said to be moving towards a more ‘inclusive’ organisation and better integration of delivery and support functions. In addition, strategic planning processes, changes to the milestone and financial monitoring system, and targeted recruitment of central business support and development roles, were preparing Play England for transition, post-March 2011, and possible independence.

Through the regional offices, Play England has maintained contact with most local authorities but often the type and amount of contact has changed, as expected, following the final award of Children’s Play Programme funding and Play England’s new focus on top-tier authorities for the DCSF programme. Some local authorities in year three were satisfied with less support because they felt Play England supported local authorities in ‘inverse proportion to success’ and they considered appropriate and timely support most important. But others were less positive, indicating the need to be consistent and manage expectations. The year four survey showed consistency in the level of face-to-face support offered to local authorities compared with year three; and case studies highlighted the development of regional or sub-regional networks. However, much was associated with the DCSF programme and, for some district councils, contact with Play England reduced or was only directly available through attending county-level play partnerships. Overall though, the survey showed local authorities felt Play England had been very effective in supporting them to develop play locally.

The next twelve months are clearly crucial in terms of determining the future of Play England and, therefore, the regional infrastructure for play. Progress is underway in developing strategic and fundraising plans; and, going forward, time and resources need to be invested in identifying gaps in skills or organisational functions that might pose a risk to sustaining an independent organisation, particularly given the widely expected public spending cuts. Progress has been made in terms of increasing links between the centre and the region yet heavy demands from funders means that support to the regions remains stretched - clearer systems for meetings and communication regarding deadlines and updates to monitoring systems might remove feelings of isolation or lack of support.
Possible changes to Play England’s governance

At the end of year four, there were mixed perceptions of the future and sustainability of Play England. Several managers indicated that their track record in effective project delivery, and good standing with national agencies, put the organisation in as good a position as possible. Following a strategic review in year three, the review steering group agreed in principle that independence, as opposed to remaining part of NCB, was the preferred option, subject to the satisfactory development of plans and secured funding. Underway in year four, and of major priority going forward, Play England is in the process of developing a five-year strategic plan for the period 2011–2016 (with an additional year to cover the transition period 2010–2011); a fundraising strategy; and a detailed business plan. These will be presented to the NCB board over the course of 2010–11, when a decision will be made about Play England’s future.

Conclusion

Play England has achieved a lot in four years; in some instances, beyond expectations. Staff supported almost all local authorities to develop play strategies and secure BIG funding, built a new regional infrastructure for play and had a major role in the development of a national government play strategy underpinned by a £235 million funding package.

Play England has established itself as the lead national play agency, earlier and more quickly than many in the play sector and beyond had anticipated; a role recognised and consolidated by its award of the government contract to be the national delivery partner for The Play Strategy. It is now coming to the end of the second year (March 2010) of the main support and challenge to top-tier local authorities function of this role, and has produced high-level strategic planning guidance to be published by the government to add to earlier key guidance documents for the play strategy. It is also delivering a major cross-professional training programme to underpin the play strategy objectives.

Over a period of rapid growth, Play England has managed itself and a massive expansion of play activity whilst maintaining a good relationship with government and its main funder. Delivery of the two national play programmes are on track and, on the whole, Play England has met its milestones despite experiencing a number of internal and external challenges – staffing and systems changes, changes to the government’s planned timescales of funding distribution, and difficult economic conditions.

As it prepares for possible independence as the country’s dedicated national play charity, Play England can draw on a considerable, wide-ranging and substantially successful track record of achieving significant progress for its sector: in policy, practice and capacity. The evaluation found strong evidence to suggest there is a continued role for Play England at local, regional and national level, and that this is key to building upon current momentum and ensuring the longer-term impact of the recent policy initiatives and investment in children’s play.
Endnotes


2. Including representatives from play associations, voluntary sector organisations, local authorities, regional government offices, play forums, national charities, Association of Directors for Children's Services, BIG and government departments.

3. Please note case studies were conducted in eight local authorities in year four.

4. Local Authority Survey 1 – Survey base = 143 local authorities

5. Local Authority Survey 2 – Survey base = 170 local authorities

6. Local Authority Survey 3 – Survey base = 163 local authorities

7. Local Authority Survey 4 – Survey base = 149 local authorities


10. The new structure consists of the following new departments: business support and development; policy, practice and communications (comprising policy and research, national practice, and communications and campaigns teams); and regional teams.

11. Play England did not have a role in local authorities' delivery of the Children's Play Programme portfolios after lottery awards had been made, but to support their strategic planning.