A briefing for adventure playground managers, staff and volunteers and others interested in supporting adventure playgrounds in the community. This briefing describes how adventure playgrounds can realise their potential as hubs of the community without compromising their core offer as children’s play spaces.
Introduction

Adventure playgrounds show how local communities can take ownership of spaces where their children can play. Many playgrounds were started by local parents who felt there was a lack of play space for their children. Local communities have often transformed derelict land and leftover spaces into areas where children can use their imagination, create, make friends and try new things.

Since the first adventure playgrounds were created in the 1950’s they have become one of the best models of staffed play provision because they provide a rich and challenging environment for children to play near to home. There are now around 180 in England. Most are in disadvantaged areas, providing a lifeline for families that many other services can struggle to reach. Many have volunteer management committees, others are run by the local authority, but all rely on community involvement.

Case Study: Glamis Adventure Playground

Glamis is located in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It is a free, open access facility with an emphasis on outdoor adventure play, situated on a half acre site in a densely built-up urban neighbourhood. One local children’s services manager described the benefit of community involvement: ‘Glamis is a great example of local management… different people come together here in a way that’s different than anywhere else in the area and which is not at all easy in Tower Hamlets – classes and races mix, they are really successful at that and put a lot of effort in – I would say they are particularly successful at Glamis… and that’s because of the magical experience children have, it makes them come back across a divide.’

When they are at an adventure playground children have ownership of the design and development of their physical, social and cultural play space. They are encouraged and supported by skilled playworkers to play in ways that are not normally condoned in other spaces; for example digging, making fires, building, demolishing and remaking their self-made creations. These are respected and left in place so children can pick up their play from where they left off.

As Danny aged 13 from Roman Road Adventure Playground in Tower Hamlets, London says: ‘It gives the kids in our local area a chance to meet other kids and also the chance to do some of the things that you would not usually get to do in an area like east London. The reason I come to the adventure playground is because I have a good time playing with my mates and I enjoy making and building stuff with wood and other materials.’

While adventure playgrounds are first and foremost children’s play spaces they are also places where parents feel their children will be safe and well looked after. Located at the heart
of the community, they provide parents with a focus for informal networks of family support.

Their neighbourhood drop-in ethos, where children are free to come and go as they please, means there is a strong sense of local ownership and many are seen as community hubs with a history of generations growing up using them and happy that their children and grandchildren continue to do so by literally ‘voting with their feet.’

Case Study: Garston Adventure Playground
Located on a three-acre site in south Liverpool, the adventure playground was built in 1978 by local long term unemployed people on a government training programme. Local parents are involved in the volunteer management committee. The adventure playground has been open so long it is used by children whose grand-parents used it when they were children. One grand-parent describes her experience: ‘This is a real asset to the community. I started coming when I was 14, then when I grew up and had my children I used to bring them here. It was really good and they never wanted to go home. Now my daughter has got a son of her own and he comes, so three generations of my family have used the playground and really enjoyed it.’

Playwork practice will vary from playground to playground but there are National Occupational Standards for playwork underpinned by the Playwork Principles. The Principles are based on the understanding that play is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and personally directed, and that play is fundamental to the health and well-being of individuals and communities. The primary role of the playworker is to support and facilitate the play process while acting as an advocate for play when engaging with adult-led agendas. Quality in Play is a quality assurance system, based on the Playwork Principles, with a framework of standards that support children’s freely chosen play and engagement with the wider community.
Adventure playgrounds provide opportunities for local communities to come together at many different levels. They appeal to children of all ages, abilities and backgrounds, and they help children to meet and make friends with other children outside school and build relationships with their peers in the neighbourhood.

They also provide opportunities to adults for a wide variety of volunteering; from using practical skills in building or maintenance, to helping with finance, administration or other management roles as part of a management committee, or simply just helping out the staff on an informal basis as and when needed.

Some adventure playgrounds have developed a range of activities around the adventure playground ‘core’ which has helped to widen their funding base and increase use by local residents and communities during the school day or otherwise outside their normal opening hours. For example, offering learning outside the classroom sessions to nearby schools, corporate training or teambuilding programmes, running healthy cooking sessions for local parents and hosting parent and toddler groups for children’s centres.

Staffing is crucial to the success of an adventure playground. Having trained playworkers makes a real difference in what can be offered to children and increases the playground’s ability to work with the local community and other children’s services in the area.

Many playgrounds have made mutually beneficial links with other services, for example schools and extended services, detached youth services and play rangers in parks and open spaces, social services, community safety, children and family support, disabled children’s services or health and physical activity programmes.

The key is not to lose sight of the original purpose of the playground and its value to children as places where they can be themselves.

Case Study: Gainsborough Adventure Playground

This adventure playground is an independent charity located in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. It is a free, open access facility providing a range of indoor and outdoor activities across a two and a half acre site that includes a play centre and a facility for under fives. The adventure playground hosts a range of services that support families in the community. The playwork staff attend meetings with social workers, teachers and nursing staff working in the area. A local Sure Start co-ordinator describes how the adventure playground obtained funding for a crèche leading to increased collaboration:

‘We share staff resources, they have trained up some of our staff for free on some of our programmes, we have outreach meetings in their building… it is partnership working at its best I think. And it’s not just with us that they work: they run storytelling sessions at the local library, and work in the local park den building to attract kids and parents, they work together with a friends of the park group, so that they can get involved in play, which creates a nice atmosphere in the park.’

Some adventure playgrounds, especially those on smaller sites or with limited indoor space, have found that there can be tensions between the adventure playground ethos and delivering wider services, and therefore they operate purely as
places for local children to have play adventures, though still very much part of informal community networks and neighbourhood support.

Because they are often used by children who may feel marginalised in or excluded from other settings, adventure playgrounds can help other agencies to engage with the children they want to support in the places where they want to be. This helps other professionals to see children in the context of their peer groups and friendship networks outside school or other more formal settings, and can greatly increase understanding of what is important in their lives.

Several playgrounds have made links with businesses through corporate social responsibility (CSR) or recycling schemes, or have links with training providers and universities by providing placements or practical coursework opportunities for students and learners.

Case Study: Glamis Adventure Playground
Glamis has created mutually beneficial relationships with a number of corporate social responsibility programmes run by major companies. In 2006, a team of graduates trainees from Fujitsu worked on a CSR project to regenerate the adventure playground. One participant said she learnt time management, working to a budget, leadership and project management. ‘It’s really improved my skills for my day job as well as meaning I can get involved in the community.’ The Head of Corporate Responsibility said the CSR project created skills and helped people feel they made a very positive contribution. ‘It helps with the engagement, the motivation and has a huge impact on our team now and in the future. These people are going to be our future business leaders.’ The playground said they also benefited enormously by having the extra help and expertise of the volunteer team. Watch a film about the project at www.fujitsu.com/uk/news/video/about-fujitsu/graduate-csr.html

The playground has continued to host CSR programmes for firms including Deutsche Bank, KPMG, Goldman Sachs and Kingston Smith. Playground manager Mark Halden says: ‘These corporate programmes give individuals and teams a chance to do something practical for the community. It also gives us an opportunity to discuss in depth, with potential corporate high fliers, the aims and needs of our project, and those of the local community.’

Adventure playgrounds are popular with corporate volunteering schemes because participants can see the immediate tangible results of their efforts and gain new skills useful in their careers. Playgrounds are also popular with training providers and universities because students get real hands-on experience of working across a range of disciplines and a chance to put their learning into practice.

Case Study: Roman Road Adventure Playground
The adventure playground, which opened in February 2011, is the first to have revenue funding sponsored by a social landlord, the Old Ford Housing Association. There are plans to use the building as a borough-wide training facility for staff, play-workers and volunteers to help with sustainability and maximise use when not open to children. The aim is to develop it as a community hub for local people, while keeping the primary purpose of the building as the playground’s indoor play area.

Adventure playgrounds, with skilled playworkers, offer a unique social space where everybody in the community can get involved. Children love them because they can play freely, parents love them because they know their children will be safe, adults love them because they know play is important to child development. They are important because they bring people together across the generations and from all walks of life, everybody can make a contribution. They have an important role, not just as spaces for children to play, but also increasing community cohesion and pride in an area. In doing so they offer lessons for others about how to engage the community and what motivates people to get involved in voluntary activity at a local neighbourhood level.
Resources

Adventure playground voices
Play England has made four short films that demonstrate the importance of adventure playgrounds to children, families and communities around England. The children, parents and local people featured make a compelling case for this form of local play provision.
www.playengland.org.uk/resources

Developing an adventure playground: the essential elements
This briefing based on the work of a group of play experts and practising adventure playworkers, chaired by Bob Hughes, describes what is unique about adventure playgrounds.
www.playengland.org.uk/developinganadventureplayground

Adventure Playgrounds: built by communities
This report on a Play England-managed grants programme for community-run adventure playgrounds shows how the playgrounds added value to the grant by mobilising community or business support and different models of sustainability.
www.playengland.org.uk/builtbycommunities

Playful Communities
This website is a toolkit for anyone wishing to get involved in creating, improving and maintaining places, including adventure playgrounds, where young people can play and spend their free time.
www.playfulcommunities.org.uk

People Make Play
Play England and Demos report looking at the impact of staffed play provision on children, families and communities. Gainsborough and Glamis adventure playgrounds are featured as case studies.
www.playengland.org.uk/peoplemakeplay

Quality in Play
Quality in Play is a quality assurance system developed by the play sector for the play sector. In an age of austerity and as the Big Society agenda develops, Quality in Play can help adventure playgrounds make the case for continuing support.
www.playengland.org.uk/qualityinplay

The Children's Play Information Service
The CPIS has a comprehensive selection of books, publications, articles and a photo archive on the history and development of the adventure playground movement.
www.ncb.org.uk/cpis

Playwork principles
These principles, endorsed by SkillsActive, establish a professional and ethical framework for playwork, and describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide a playwork perspective for working with children and young people.
www.skillsactive.com/playwork/principles
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For further information about the Engaging Communities in Play programme visit [www.playengland.org.uk/our-work/engaging-communities-in-play](http://www.playengland.org.uk/our-work/engaging-communities-in-play)

Play England promotes excellent free play opportunities for all children.

We believe that all children should have the freedom and space to play enjoyed by previous generations.

This involves more than just providing well-designed play areas; it requires the commitment of local and national decision makers to create more child-friendly communities.

By making play a priority we can create healthier and happier communities for all.