This briefing, for local authorities and partner organisations working together to support community involvement in play, explains the value of play partnerships and how they can be improved to better meet the needs of local children and the wider community.
Introduction

A successful play partnership that brings together local people, voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups, the local authority and other public and private organisations with an interest in play, is one of the key ways in which local communities can be directly involved in making decisions on what play opportunities should be offered in their neighbourhoods; and how and by who these are best provided.

What is a play partnership?
A play partnership develops a shared vision for play across an area, with clear commitments from each partner and a coordinated delivery plan. Many local authority areas already have a play partnership. A good partnership will be open to all parties with an interest in play and enables them to work together to improve local play spaces and services. It should work at the smallest local authority level practicable, for example, in two-tier authorities at the district level. A county play forum or partnership should also be encouraged wherever practicable, with participation from all the district/borough level play partnerships.

Play partnerships and the local play strategy
As the body with access to the best local knowledge of play, the play partnership is ideally placed to produce or review a local play strategy. This should be a practical working document that all partners can sign up to. Its overall aim is to improve local play opportunities and decide which local organisations should be involved in putting the strategy into action.

A play strategy should include:
  • A comprehensive audit and mapping of what play opportunities are available locally and what condition they are in
  • A thorough consultation and engagement process with children, young people, families and the wider community to establish needs and aspirations

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• Clear local policies for the provision of play facilities and services
• Careful analysis to see where the main gaps in provision are
• Setting local standards for the quantity, quality and accessibility of play provision
• A practical realistic action plan of what is achievable with available resources and who should be responsible for delivery
• Systems for monitoring and evaluating the implementation and success of the strategy

Purpose and function of the play partnership
A primary goal in any partnership is to achieve more as a team than the individual partners can working on their own. Play partnerships should be as inclusive as possible and allow everyone with an interest to contribute effectively.

Some key roles of a play partnership are to:
  • Bring together organisations interested and involved in play
  • Involve key stakeholders and decision-makers
  • Identify local priorities for play
  • Realise the potential for collaborative work
  • Raise the profile of play and campaign for play locally
  • Identify potential funding and provide opportunities for pooling budgets and resources for play
  • Develop, monitor, and review a local play strategy and its action plan
  • Fully engage the voluntary and community sector.
Who should be involved in the play partnership?

A local play partnership should include:

- Voluntary sector play and youth organisations e.g. Play Associations
- Representatives of parents, children and families
- Local disability organisations
- Residents and community associations
- Other relevant voluntary sector organisations e.g. CVS, friends of parks groups etc
- Town/parish councils/recreational trusts (as appropriate)
- Public health services and GP's
- Local authority departments e.g.
  - Play and youth/community services
  - Services for disabled children and young people
  - Parks/green space/countryside/‘streetscene’ services
  - Children's services e.g. Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare
  - Leisure services
  - Planning policy

Other possible services and agencies to include in the partnership are:

- Housing service/associations/registered social landlords
- Property services and regeneration/economic development
- Education department
- Highways/transport services
- Police and criminal justice agencies/community safety
- Environmental organisations
- Childcare providers
- Regeneration agencies
- Schools and colleges
- Private sector providers

Key points

- Partnerships should have a varied and balanced membership and not be dominated by any particular organisation or sector
- Working groups should be established where there are key tasks or specific objectives
- Membership may need to change over time so should be reviewed annually
Joining or establishing a play partnership
There may already be a play partnership in your area. To check, contact your local authority and ask for the section most involved with children’s play. The main contact there should be able to tell you how you or your organisation can get involved.

If there is no play partnership you can discuss how to convene a first meeting and invite key players. This briefing could be circulated in advance of the meeting and form the basis of a discussion as to the benefits of establishing an ongoing group.

One of the first steps for a new partnership is to agree broad terms of reference for the group. This would be a short and simple document covering things such as:

- Membership – who should be involved in the partnership
- Aims and purposes of the partnership
- Responsibilities of members – what is expected of members
- Arrangements for meetings and decision making mechanisms
- Arrangements for dissolution of the partnership should this become necessary

Once the partnership becomes established as a valued ongoing group it may wish to consider adopting a formal constitution. If it wishes to adopt a wider remit under which, say, it intends to hold its own funds for local projects, it could consider registering as a charity or even setting up as some form of social enterprise.

Securing influence – championing play
To ensure your partnership makes a difference you should:

- Include key decision makers from partner organisations
- Recognise and promote the contribution of play to other agendas and strategies e.g. youth and children’s services, social inclusion, health, community safety and regeneration
- Identify and agree a lead officer for play within the local authority
- Establish clear links with senior officers in the local authority, including directors of relevant departments
- Involve councillors and/or influential high profile local figures as advocates or champions for play.
Successful partnerships

Effective play partnerships are likely to be strong in the following five areas:

1. Vision, purpose and leadership - the vision will be inspiring and understood and accepted as important throughout each partner organisation.

The Team Bury play partnership is made up of a wide range of public agencies including all relevant council services, elected council members, fire and police services, and public health. It also has active participation from tenants and residents associations, local charities, and the CVS.

In developing its play strategy in 2007, great care was taken to create and develop a collectively agreed vision for play and encapsulate it into a working document which identified clear goals and targets for the following three years.

The result is that Team Bury play partnership is a highly committed group comprising people from a wide range of agencies who are dedicated to providing the best possible play opportunities within the borough and educating people about the importance of play and the way it should be provided.

Team Bury recently developed a new play strategy for 2010-2013. It sets out their principles and aspirations for play within a new political and policy context. It includes a newly refreshed and agreed vision for play which has re-energised the partnership. Team Bury is confident that through their work play will continue to be a high priority in the borough.

2. Outcomes based on the play needs of children - partners will focus on results, satisfying the play needs and expectations of children and young people through their active engagement.

The needs of children and young people were central to the process of developing the local play strategy in Dudley. The partnership developed their Just Enjoy website for children and young people which had in excess of 7000 hits over a two month period. A series of road show events using cutting edge technology were also organised. Both of these exercises helped establish priorities for the play strategy.

The Dudley play partnership also made sure that disabled children were actively involved. They set up a children and young people’s panel, Design 2gether, in which disabled children were fully engaged. The panel provided feedback directly into play space design. To recruit the panel play staff visited various other decision making panels in which young people were taking a lead. This included Dudley Decision Making Kids; me2 young people’s panel (for disabled children and young people); KIDS Orchard (for disabled children and young people); and Chat Back Productions (for looked after children).

As a result of these actions the outcomes of the strategy and the practical detail of play space design are both based on the needs and ideas of children and young people.

3. A ‘can do’ ethos and good communications - members will share ‘can do’ values and have effective communications at all levels within the partnership and within partner organisations.

Cornwall’s play partnership is a countywide partnership, with membership from the county council including parks and open spaces, locality managers, early years/childcare and Aiming High. In addition to this there is representation from National Trust, the Eden Project, housing, town and parish councils, play associations and other voluntary sector groups.

The partnership’s success due to its ‘can do’ attitude ensured that whilst Cornwall was going through major local government reorganisation play continued to have a voice and an active representation across other forums. Without the partnership it is likely that planning for play would have fallen off the agenda.
Responsibility for play is shared between agencies in Cornwall, having no local authority play department or play officer. This means the partnership's current work is critical in ensuring a new play strategy is produced to meet the future need of Cornwall's children and young people. This process is now well underway.

4. Innovation and an openness to learn and improve in relation to providing better play opportunities - partners should continuously seek improvements in activities and ways of working, learning from each other and from elsewhere.

Gateshead’s play partnership has shown an openness to learn from the outset and is innovative in its approach. At its very first partnership meeting, members were able to engage in a range of play activities, such as den building, junk modelling and parachute games, setting the standard for further partnership meetings. The aim is to be inclusive and to provide development opportunities for members.

Five years on, the full partnership still meets every quarter and there are about 20 active members. There is also a core group called the play executive who meet monthly and is responsible for managing the play strategy and compiling reports that are submitted to the full partnership.

The partnership has recently refreshed its local Play Strategy and is responsible for its development and delivery in line with Gateshead’s sustainable community strategy Vision 2030.

5. Good management and performance measurement arrangements for the implementation of the play strategy and its action plan - members put in place the necessary management practices and resources to achieve the partnership's goals.

The play partnership in Gedling has particularly good management and performance measurement arrangements. Their action plan is SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-based) and detailed. Each action point has a clearly identified lead agency, a specific performance measure, and criteria to assess the success or otherwise of the action. The actions are related to a thorough needs assessment, make links with relevant wider strategic outcomes (e.g. their sustainable community strategy) and have specified target dates for completion (as well as taking note of any resources needed for their implementation). The partnership has also devised an excellent flow diagram illustrating the performance monitoring and progress procedure that they have adopted. This provides a clear structure to help keep the partnership updated on progress. They also have a ‘traffic lights’ system for each action point to assist with this monitoring.

For further information visit: www.gedling.gov.uk/leisure/ls-gedling_play_partnership.htm

A strong play partnership

A strong and effective local play partnership is key to the successful production, review and delivery of a local play strategy. This, in turn, is the best way to ensure that the local community is at the heart of determining what play opportunities are needed locally and deciding how and by whom priority improvements should be made.

A strong play partnership, in which local people and the voluntary sector are fully included will ensure that play facilities and services are of the kind the community wants, provided where they are needed, and best serve the play and informal recreation interests of local children, young people and their families.
Useful resources

Planning for Play: Guidance on the development and implementation of a local play strategy
This guide provides useful advice for those who are leading the development of a local play strategy.
www.playengland.org.uk/planningforplay

Playful Communities
Playful Communities provides information, advice and resources for individuals, local community
groups, voluntary sector organisations and others who are developing play provision in their local
neighbourhood. The website includes resources for local people involved in managing staffed play
projects and volunteering, as well as for those supporting or maintaining play areas.
www.playfulcommunities.org.uk

Charity Commission
The Charity Commission website provides advice on how your play partnership could establish itself
as an independent charitable trust.
www.charitycommission.gov.uk
This briefing was produced as part of Play England’s Engaging Communities in Play programme funded by the Department for Education.

For further information about the Engaging Communities in Play programme visit 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.