

Summary: Tools for evaluating local play provision

A technical guide to Play England's local play indicators

Introduction and summary

'To support local data on the new play indicator NI199, all play pathfinders and playbuilders are being encouraged to undertake local evaluation to assess the impact of the capital investment programme ... Play England will provide day-to-day support to authorities as they undertake their local evaluations. Play pathfinders and playbuilders may wish to use specific play indicators developed by Play England for their local evaluations.'¹

The profile of children's play has never been higher than it is today. In 2008, the government launched the first ever national Play Strategy to address the issues identified in the *Fair Play* national consultation. As part of the implementation of The Play Strategy a national indicator, NI 199, measuring children's satisfaction with parks and play areas, was added to the National Indicator Set in April 2009 with the aim of encouraging local authorities to prioritise the development of improved local play opportunities.

Play England has developed, with the play sector, a suite of local play indicators to support local evaluation. The local play indicators can also provide valuable evidence to support the achievement of a number of other national indicators, including those relating to: stronger and safer communities; children's health, safety, enjoyment, achievement, contribution to society and economic well-being; tackling exclusion and promoting equality; the local economy; and environmental sustainability.²

Introduction to local play indicators

The government, the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) and the private, public, and voluntary and community sectors all recognise the importance of accurately targeted capital and revenue investment in children's play provision. It is therefore essential for those responsible for the management of local play provision to be fully aware of current industry good practice. Without high-quality and current data on provision, accessibility, quality and satisfaction, providers cannot make the right decisions on how and where to allocate the resources that can deliver the best possible

¹ DCSF (2008) *The Play Strategy*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
www.dcsf.gov.uk/play

² Play England (2009) *How children's play contribute to the national indicator set*
<http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/play-national-indicator-set.pdf>

opportunities for children's play. The local play indicators can be extremely useful in providing the range of data needed to guide those decisions.

Other benefits of adopting and implementing the local play indicators include:

- ongoing site evaluation and monitoring, where regular feedback from users is becoming essential for grant reporting requirements
- measuring success: illustrating that recent efforts to improve play provision are making a real difference to children and communities
- promoting stronger relationships with local users
- supporting internal (or external) applications for revenue funding, thereby bringing play closer to mainstream funding within local authorities
- identifying whether play spaces are meeting the ten guiding principles with the *Design for Play* guide and other good practice guidance
- providing valuable decision-making information on tendered design proposals for new play projects
- mapping of play provision: enabling an improved, accessible service to children and parents by allowing useful information to be displayed on local authorities websites, supporting the national and local case for future investment in play
- promoting greater inter-departmental cooperation, cross-council border coordination, cooperation between local authority tiers and with voluntary and community sector play providers
- providing performance information to senior managers and councillors at cabinet level and to statutory Children's Trusts
- evidencing the need for good quality play provision to be integrated into new housing developments
- incorporation into Local Area Agreements (LAAs), local improvement frameworks and local strategic partnerships.

National indicator 199 and the local play indicators

The Play Strategy introduced an indicator into the National Indicator Set to assess children and young people's satisfaction with the parks and play areas where they live and go to school. This indicator, NI199, was introduced in 2009 and every top tier local authority now has to report against this indicator on their success in supporting children's enjoyment through play. Data for NI199 is collected through the annual TellUs survey of school-aged children, conducted up to 2009 by Ofsted³ and now led by DCSF.⁴

Therefore, as part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment process, all top tier local authorities will now have to report against NI 199, showing children's satisfaction

³ *TellUs 3 survey 2008:*

Ofsted: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Statistics/2008-Tellus3-Children-and-young-people-survey/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Statistics/2008-Tellus3-Children-and-young-people-survey/(language)/eng-GB)

⁴ *TellUs 4 portal:* www.tellussurvey.org.uk/

with parks and play areas. This information provides managers with a valuable management tool to inform their overall assessment of the quality of their play offer to children and young people. However, information about play provision, from NI199 and other aspects of the TellUs survey, can be complemented with information gathered through the use of the more detailed local play indicators.

Data to inform the local play indicators is collected, by the local authority, at the local community or neighbourhood level. It provides detailed information to managers of children's play provision allowing them to identify where they are succeeding, and where they are not doing as well, in relation to quality, quantity and access to local play provision. The data will also help managers assess the impact of their provision through developing a picture of the extent to which children are outside playing and also what they think of the range and quality of the spaces and facilities available to them. Managers are therefore able to take suitable, timely action and are well-informed in the planning and development process.

Developing the local play indicators

Over the past four years, Play England, with Ashley Godfrey Associates and INSPIRE, has developed and piloted a suite of local play indicators for participation, access, quality and satisfaction with play provision. Using these four indicators will help district, unitary and county councils to better understand and meet the play needs of local children and young people.

The four local indicators and the process of collecting the necessary data were successfully piloted by six local authorities in 2006-07. These were:

- **Bolton Metropolitan Council**, covering the large urban area of Bolton and its immediate surroundings, northwest of Manchester
- **Bristol City Council**, a large unitary authority in the west of England that covers a primarily urban area with a diverse population base
- **Chelmsford District Council**, a largely rural area in Essex based on the county town of Chelmsford but also covering a number of smaller villages and parishes
- **Kirklees Council**, a metropolitan council in West Yorkshire centred on the large town of Huddersfield and also covering a range of smaller towns and villages. Kirklees has a large range of play provision
- **Manchester City Council**, an entirely urban metropolitan council covering a large and diverse community which includes a major city centre and inner city undergoing significant regeneration, and suburban areas
- **The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea**, a London borough in the west of the central metropolis that includes some extremely high value properties as well as areas of deprivation.

Play England is very grateful to the many staff involved at each of these local authorities for their constructive and enthusiastic approach to piloting the indicators and to their contribution to refining the guidance.

The local play indicators

The four local indicators should be used together either across the whole authority area or in local neighbourhoods where there is concern about the provision of play opportunities. The data collection seeks to measure the extent to which, wherever they live or spend the majority of their free time, children and young people have access to spaces and facilities for play and informal recreation which:

- pass the '3 frees' test, ie free of charge, where children are free to come and go, and free to choose what they do whilst there ⁵
- are accessible, welcoming and engaging for all, including those who are disabled or have specific needs and wishes
- allow for the differing needs people of different ages and with different play interests and needs.

The four local indicators for play provision are defined in the table below:

Indicator 1	Participation	Method of generation
Description	The percentage of all children and young people aged birth to 16 years (from all social and ethnic groups, including those who are disabled), who play out for at least four hours each week.	Household survey
Indicator 2	Access to a variety of facilities and spaces	Method of generation
Description	The percentage of children and young people aged from birth to 16 years that have access to at least three different types of space or facility (doorstep, local and neighbourhood), at least one of which is a dedicated place for play and informal recreation, which are all within easy walking or cycling distance as defined below.	Open space and play strategy audits GIS mapping
Indicator 3	Quality of facilities and spaces	Method of generation
Description	The proportion of play spaces and facilities with high scores for location, play value and care and maintenance as assessed using the Playable Space Quality Assessment Tool.	Site surveys using quality assessment tool
Indicator 4	Satisfaction	Method of generation
Description	The percentage of all children and young people (from all social and ethnic groups, including those who are disabled), who think that the range and quality of play facilities and spaces they are able to access in their local neighbourhood is good/very good.	Questionnaire survey of children and young people

⁵ Concept developed by Perry Else, Sheffield Hallam University 2005

The participation indicator

The best way to evidence that local authority play provision is achieving its aim is to measure whether it is having any impact on the amount of time children spend playing outside. The participation indicator does this by identifying the amount of time children spend in play outside the home each week. Over time, a picture can be built up of changing habits and attitudes.

The participation indicator measures the percentage of all children from birth to 16 years (from all social and ethnic groups, including those that are disabled) who play outside for at least four hours each week. This is based on the recommendation of the Chief Medical Officer that the minimum acceptable amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity for any child is 60 minutes a day of which around four sessions a week might be outdoor play.⁶

Data can be collected via the local authority's regular Household Survey or through similar surveys of the local community, such as for PPG17 audits. The aim is to gather a large sample (eg 5000 households) of views from across the community.

The access indicator

The access indicator shows where different types of playable space are located in relation to where children live. It gives the percentage of children from birth to 16 years (from all social and ethnic groups, including those that are disabled) that have access to at least three different types of open space (doorstep, local, neighbourhood), at least one of which is a dedicated place for play and informal recreation, which are within easy walking or cycling distance.

The data is gathered by use of open space and local play strategy audits, which may have included an initial site visit, and for many local authorities will already have been completed as part of their PPG17 requirements. The use of GIS mapping systems allows providers to plot locations and accompanying information, to help identify issues around access to play spaces and to identify areas of neighbourhoods with a deficit in play provision.

Typology of playable spaces

Play England has researched the various types of playable space found in differing urban, rural and semi-rural environments across the country. The typology produced reflects work with pilot authorities into the different nature of these varied spaces, which include playable places with and without designated play equipment and features, and seeks to categorise them in a flexible, non-restrictive and practical way so that every authority can identify and allocate any of their playable spaces into one of the three types.

The distance thresholds are based on walking times for children to each type of facility.

⁶ DH (2004) *At least five a week: Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health*. London: Department of Health (p30).
www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4080994

Classifying playable spaces

The specific spaces that need to be covered by the audit are:

Type A: 'doorstep' spaces and facilities for play and informal recreation.

This is a small open space within sight of home, where children, especially younger children, can play within the view of known adults.

This could be a grassed area, a paved open space, a residential street in a home zone or a small designed play area, which is large enough to enable young children to play within sight of known adults. The space could incorporate some interesting and attractive landscape features and/or a small number of items of fixed play equipment to create an environment which will stimulate young children's play providing opportunities for a variety of play experiences, bearing in mind that older children and young people may also use the space from time to time. A doorstep space would be sufficiently close to home for the children who use it to feel safe and be able to interact with individuals and groups of other children. It should also be capable of catering for the needs of children with a range of impairments. Seating may be available for carers to be able to sit, watch and meet other people.

Type B: 'local' spaces and facilities for play and informal recreation.

A larger space which can be reached safely by children beginning to travel independently and with friends, without accompanying adults and for adults with young children to walk to with ease.

This could be a grassed area, a small park, a local open space, a designed space for play or informal recreation or a school playground open out of school hours, which is attractive to children as they begin to move around their neighbourhoods without being accompanied by adults. These spaces and facilities provide a varied and interesting physical environments including, for example, natural features, sand and water, and incorporate some interesting and attractive landscape features with varying levels and contours, which test children's capabilities. There might also be features designed for specific activities such as ball games, wheeled sports or meeting places and/or several items of play equipment offering a variety of play experiences. Play facilities might also include local staffed play provision such as play centres, play schemes, play ranger projects and adventure play grounds. These spaces and facilities should also be capable of catering for the needs of children with a range of impairments. The children who use these spaces and facilities should feel safe and be able to interact with individuals and groups of other children of different ages.

Type C: 'neighbourhood' spaces and facilities for play and informal recreation.

A larger space or facility for informal recreation which children and young people, used to travelling longer distances independently, can reach safely and spend time in play and informal recreation with their peers and have a wider range of play experiences.

This might be a park, playing field, recreation ground or natural open space such as woodland, moor land or a beach, which is accessible and attractive to older children and young people.

The space or facility provides for a variety of age appropriate play and informal recreational experiences. It might provide a varied physical environment incorporating some interesting and attractive landscape features with varying levels and contours. There are likely to be more challenging items of equipment and features that meet the needs of older children and young people. Larger facilities specifically designed for informal recreation could be present such as a ball court, multi-use games area or skateboard area which can provide the opportunity for a variety of experiences to young people with differing skills levels. These spaces and facilities should also be capable of catering for the needs of children and young people with a range of impairments. There is likely to be sufficient space to play large group ball games and seating/shelter to enable young people to socialise with their friends.

The play place grid

The play place grid below gives examples of the types of facility and space which can offer children and young people the best opportunities for play and informal recreation and which should form the basis of provision where children should be able to play freely and free of charge in their own neighbourhoods.

	Supervised and semi-supervised	No formal supervision
Designated places for play and informal recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adventure playgrounds Open access play centres Play ranger and outreach play projects Mobile play facilities School playgrounds (out of school hours) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playgrounds/play areas Bike, skate and skateboard facilities Ball courts Multi-use games areas Hangout/youth shelters
Non-designated places for play and informal recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parks with rangers and gardeners Streets with wardens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residential streets Public rights of way Neighbourhood open spaces Parks and green spaces Beaches, rivers and lakes Routes to school and play areas Playing fields and recreation grounds Public squares and plazas

Designated and non-designated playable spaces – places where children play may or may not be specifically designed for play or informal recreation (designated or non-designated) and may or may not be supervised by staff trained in playwork or other skills.

Supervised and semi-supervised play provision- supervised and semi-supervised play provision will need to pass the ‘three frees’ test as described above. This may be difficult to assess in some circumstances, particularly where this involves the use of school buildings. Where children have to register when they attend a supervised or semi-supervised open access play facility, this is entirely acceptable. However, if children have to be collected by parents or a charge is made then this type of provision cannot be considered within the accessibility indicator because the children are not fully engaged in ‘free play’.

Distance thresholds for catchment areas

The distance thresholds for the different types of playable space are based on typical walking times and distances for children from the home to the identified play space in the same way as Fields in Trust identify walking distances to the LAP, LEAP and NEAP types of equipped play space in their guidance on play and outdoor sport⁷.

Distances are plotted on maps as buffers around the play space location. Where buffers overlap, more than one playable space of any of the three types can be reached by children in that neighbourhood.

Type of space	Distance criteria	
	Walking distance (m)	Straight line distance (m)
Type A: ‘Doorstep’ spaces and facilities for play and informal recreation	100	60
Type B: ‘Local’ spaces and facilities for play and informal recreation	400	240
Type C: ‘Neighbourhood’ spaces and facilities for play and informal recreation	1000	600

⁷ Fields in Trust (2008) *Planning and design for outdoor sport and play*. Fields in Trust: www.fieldsintrust.org

The quality indicator

Sound knowledge of the quality of playable space is essential for successful mapping. The Play England *Playable Space Quality Assessment Tool*, which supports the quality indicator, is designed to help planners and play providers with these assessments.

The tool focuses on three major aspects of playable space: the location and its accessibility, the play value, and the care and maintenance. It offers guidelines for the assessment of the three different types of space: doorstep, local and neighbourhood.

It is also essential that a full Access audit is undertaken in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). As well as including a detailed analysis of the playground itself, the audit should include access to the site in relation to, for example, car parks, bus routes, and paths to the play space, looking specifically at access and inclusion. Many local authorities insist on this as part of the independent evaluation of newly created play spaces by organisations such as RoSPA, the RPII or other qualified and experienced persons, along with a safety installation inspection and a risk-benefit assessment. KIDS *Inclusivity Assessment Tool* complements the Play England assessment tool, looking in detail at addressing the needs of disabled children.⁸

Considering the location of playable space

Location is perhaps the single most important factor in how much children use playable spaces. In general, children like to play locally where they can be seen, see others and meet others. Young people are able to roam further although they, too, like to feel safe wherever they are with their friends. In addition, disabled children and parents or carers with buggies should be able to access play areas as much as non-disabled children. Often children will play with younger siblings who may need to be taken to the area in a buggy or pushchair.

The site assessment of the location of playable space should consider:

- opportunities for informal oversight by passers-by or nearby
- properties such as houses or community centres
- the extent to which the space or facility is used by children
- how easy it is for children and young people to get there
- issues of personal safety, security and lighting
- how those with impairments or with buggies and pushchairs will get there
- the opportunities for meeting other children
- how well the space is designed to complement the site.

Considering the play value of playable space

Quality assessment should consider a range of different, innovative and challenging ways in which children can experience different environments. The natural

⁸ KIDS (2009) *Inclusivity Assessment*. London: KIDS.
http://www.kids.org.uk/information/100428/102566/102847/model_documents/

environment offers many opportunities for this and consideration can be given to the varied and interesting ways in which children can play. Quiet, contemplative play is as important as boisterous and physical play. Although children will play in their own way in any given area, their activity can be enriched through creating appropriate and stimulating play environments. Children need to take risks to learn about and understand their own capabilities. Risk does not mean creating hazardous environments, but it does mean ensuring that opportunities for challenging and extending children's abilities are available through design.⁹

Quality assessment of the play value should consider whether the site:

- entices children to play
- offers play opportunities for disabled children
- meets the play needs of different children and young people of differing ages
- provides opportunities for:
 - different types of movement
 - imaginative play
 - ball games
 - changing the environment or space
- includes access to natural environments and materials
- has places for children to sit
- offers added play value – that is, not just a basic experience of sensation but also possibilities for children to take risks without undue hazard
- encourages social interaction between children and between accompanying parents and carers.

Considering the care and maintenance of playable space

Whilst playable space should offer children and young people challenging and absorbing play experiences it must also be checked regularly for unexpected hazards, subjected to rigorous risk-benefit assessment and be well cared for.

Quality assessment of the care and maintenance should consider:

- how well the space is maintained
- health and safety requirements
- seating for adults
- litter bins
- the possible need for dog-free zones
- the presence of supervisory adults (eg park keepers, street wardens, play rangers, community support officers)
- the presence of toilets and changing facilities, where appropriate.

⁹ Ball D, Gill T and Spiegel B (2008) *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide*. London: Play England, Department for Children, Schools and Families, and Department for Culture, Media and Sport. <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources>

The satisfaction indicator

The satisfaction indicator measures the percentage of all children and young people aged birth to 16 (from all social and ethnic groups, including those who are disabled), who think that the range and quality of play facilities and spaces they are able to access in their local neighbourhood is good/very good. It differs from the Tellus Survey in that it provides a more localised view of children's satisfaction with their play facilities. It is also useful to include parents' satisfaction in changing play provision.

Feedback is collected from children by means of on-site (at play spaces) and off-site (eg on street, schools, clubs, etc) questionnaires. However, if comparisons are to be made with other local authorities data collection should be done only via school surveys. The results can be used to evidence the changing attitudes of children to local play provision in its various forms and locations as financial and attitudinal investment in raising standards in design quality, maintenance quality and improved access by the local authority begins to have an impact.

Conclusion

The four local play indicators are voluntary but by adopting them as a package Play England hopes that local authorities will soon see the investment of resources as worthwhile. As communities begin to see that the investment in providing a range of great local play spaces is having a positive impact on childhood health, on public satisfaction with public areas, on better accessibility to play spaces and on providing children with somewhere to go, something to do and a way to make friends and develop social skills, communities will want to see local authorities continuing with and widening the programme of improved provision in public amenities.

Full details of the local play indicators, the Playable Space Quality Assessment Tool and how to apply them are available on the Play England website at www.playengland.org.uk under resources/briefings, statements and policies.

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