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OPEN ACCESS PLAY PROVISION IN THE BRADFORD DISTRICT.

This is a final report for the Early Years and Childcare Service of The City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council reporting on The Impact of Open Access Play Provision in the Bradford District.

THE PROJECT BRIEF.

The aims and objectives of the project brief were to:

- Research and evidence the impact of open access play provision offered by the Play team at Bradford Early Years and Childcare Service.
- Use the evidence to provide outcomes for children, young people and their families as a result of accessing open access play provision as based on those identified within the Every Child Matters agenda.
- Identify the impact that open access play provision has on communities where the provision is based.
- Provide evidence which can contribute to raising the profile of open access play provision as an effective service for children.
- Use the evidence drawn from the research and evaluation to justify open access play provision as part of the children's service agenda.

INTRODUCTION: How the project was approached.

The main focus of this report is to provide a relatively detailed overview which attempts to evaluate the impact of Open Access Play Provision projects. In the initial stages of the project considerable attempts were made to adhere to the project specification.

The consultations with children and young people were generally uncomplicated. (The honesty and straightforwardness of children made it so). Accessing parents and carers proved rather more difficult. Parental/carer involvement in the projects seemed to be limited although reportage from Playwork staff indicated a high level of involvement. This is reflected in staff log books of activities around the play pods.

The time frame of the project and the submission of the report were extended due to unforeseen commitments and demands of the author of the project report. This has not detracted from the content or purpose of the report or its findings. If anything the extension has provided an opportunity to deal in more detail with some of the aspects of the project.

An attempt at a definition of Open Access Play provision.

Defined by the Welsh Assembly Government within the National Minimum Standards for Open Access Play provision:

“Open Access Play provision may be permanent or short-term schemes and generally cater for older children. However, children aged five to seven years may attend. The main purpose of the provision is to enable children to learn and develop through play opportunities in a safe environment in the absence of their parents or carers.”

Furthermore, the Vale of Glamorgan offers another rather more succinct definition:

“A supervised provision that can be run in a building, park or open space. It has been designed to respond to the needs of children and young people by providing a stimulating environment and a wide variety of resources”.

Also, Playlink (London) suggests that;

“Open access provision is where children may come and go freely; that is where there is no requirement for children to be either brought to or collected from the provision by an adult”.

It is clear these definitions offer several interpretations. However, it may not define how the Play Pods, as developed in the Bradford District, in part operate. For the sake of this report each of these definitions will attempt to embrace the Play Pod experience as open access facility or feature

The contemporary debate about open access play provision has recently embraced a specific terminology which identifies three essential ingredients: these are most often referred to as the ‘Three Frees’.

They are:

1. Free of charge at the point of entry: No child should be required to pay to use a play provision because play is a fundamental right of all children.

2. Free to come and go: Children must feel the freedom to choose when they want to arrive and leave a provision. No child should feel confined to the play provision.

3. Free to choose.

In order to assist in the development of self esteem and confidence children should be able to choose what activities they wish to be involved in when attending the play provision.

These three elements now form the cornerstone which helps to define the purpose and experience of open access play provision.

Another essential ingredient in the provision of open access play facilities is the use of natural spaces and places for children to exploit and roam. Those supporting and arguing for such provision could do no worse than to apply the sentiment offered in the following statement and note that it was made 25 years ago!

“One cannot help but wonder.... If we had conserved more natural environments in the first place, perhaps there would not be the same need to create artificial man conceived environments. Perhaps there might be more to be achieved by conserving existing environments and turning developed areas into natural areas than what we accomplish in creating artificial playgrounds that we are building in profusion.” (Mason, 1982. p 86)

Some people might suggest that Play Pods are an artificial play construct, temporary and are only made available to counter the negative or non-existent play provision that is available for children. However this does not detract from the evidence that children using the play pods were able in most instances to ‘drift’ and roam across space which is both natural and constructed. In conversations with the playwork staff who supervised the pods the aspect of ‘play roaming’ was identified as an integral part of children’s feeling of freedom and space. The ‘pods’ mark out areas as ‘play spots’ for children who are able to identify the facility as a point of security.

METHODOLOGY.

The main body of evaluation work within the project took place during late winter and early spring. Inevitably this did not enhance high levels of attendances at the venues. This has to be viewed as a major restriction. However, children did make themselves available to be interviewed. Some parents were also interviewed, although there were fewer than originally anticipated. To supplement this unexpected reduction in adult participation and to obtain local views and opinions individuals were approached in the streets and local areas where play provision sites were located. Methodologically this is problematic and is plagued with obvious difficulties. However, those who were approached were courteous and helpful. Inevitably views and opinion was varied and broad. (On one occasion the researcher was approached himself and asked what he was doing!)

The initial intention was to organise a series of focus groups linked to specific activities involving both children and adults. The aim being to gather opinion, ideas and reaction to the use and worth of open access play provision within their communities. The level of participation was considered to be essential for the success of the evaluation.

It became quickly apparent that this approach would not be possible. The main reasons being:

- Some of the potential participants in the groups were irregular attendees at the provision. Accessing their views proved difficult.
- The potential participants only attended some of the provision on a weekly basis. This militated against them giving up their time to talk in a group. They were too busy playing once they got to the provision! On reflection, not a bad thing for a play project!

- A stranger (researcher) asking children and young people to sit down and discuss their play provision require the development of relationships/trust and a demonstration of commitment on the part of the researcher. This proved to be almost impossible within the timescale of the project.
- For a variety of reasons some of the 'pod' provision was no longer in operation.

A contingency plan was in place to develop a questionnaire to be administered in an open ended and informal format. (See appendix). This methodology, whilst limited in application can elicit useful information especially in the context of open access play provision. Furthermore, the children appeared to be more relaxed with this format but importantly felt involved and central to the evaluation work.

The results and findings of these administered questionnaires appear later in this report.

Venues visited:

1. Ashlands pod.
2. Scholemoor pod.
3. Wibsey pod (this provision was not operating at the time but its notoriety required a visit!)
4. Eccleshill adventure playground.
5. Holycroft
6. Eastwood.

The other pod venues were either not operating during the course of the research and evaluation or a visit was not arranged.

ONE POD EXPERIENCE IN LATE MARCH 2007.

An observation at a pod.

It is a bright and sunny early spring evening and I have arrived at the unlocked pod. One girl, aged 9 is waiting with her dad in his 'window cleaning van'. Two members of the playwork staff arrive when suddenly 3 other children arrive appearing to have 'beamed' down. One boy, age 11 races across the field to the pod claiming he has been there an hour waiting for the pod to open. He turns immediately and runs back to the 'beck' from where he came. A friend arrives with three sticks. In the next thirty minutes five more children arrive – two with parents the others without. Two boys continue to play in the 'beck' 200 yards away but keep glancing back towards the pod. The others, all girls bar one boy continue to play close to the pod. Most of their play is generally self directed, sporadic and sometimes fragmented. It is best described as being in a process of 'flow'.

Two children begin to get the fruit 'crusher' to work – batteries are connected- fruit is chopped and placed inside the 'crusher'. 'Smoothies' are in the process of being made and this becomes the centre of attention for most of the

children. Roles are swapped, sometimes readily other times with an argument, almost always with verbal negotiation.

At the back of the pod a den is made out of a parachute into which a few of the 'not quite smooth 'smoothies' are taken. There is a slight altercation with one of the boys who seems to be unable to concentrate on one activity for more than a few minutes. Most of the other children deal with this disruptive influence by removing themselves from his vicinity. But he is determined to challenge them. After the interlude with the argument and the 'smoothies' three boys return to the 'beck to continue their 'damming'. Some of the other group join them in the process. Various discarded objects are pulled from the 'beck' including a useless chair and a rusty shovel. Both of these items are left on the side of the beck until one of the boys hurls the shovel back into the water. An onlooker would be amazed at the lack of conversation taking place. There are few words spoken but a great deal of furrowed brow concentration. Two parents cross the field to collect children from an after school club somewhat perplexed by the activities around and beyond the pod.

COMMENT.

We should not be surprised that any passer – by observing this play activity around the pod would, undoubtedly assume this to be a chaotic and somewhat dangerous session. On closer inspection what is revealed is a rich pageant of communication, decision making, negotiation, tolerance, experimenting, exploring and contentment. There is quietness, an assured and measured presence of the Playwork staff that the children are aware of and on occasions will approach for help. There is a calm process of protection and permission delivered by both the Playworkers to the children and vice versa. This makes a setting such as this quite unique.

The pod clearly offers children an opportunity to be in a place where they might otherwise not access or be allowed to explore. There is a clear belief on the part of the children that others should be able to come to the pod to enjoy what they do.

"I do tell other children at school about this place. But their parents won't let them come" (Girl, age 10).

Descriptions of activities around the other pods provided by members of the Playwork staff are as equally varied, exciting and carefree as the experience described here. They can only be described as 'playing in a state of flow'.

SNAPSHOT OF REPORT:

- All the following comments, remarks and findings are based on the various interactions and events that have been undertaken as part of this project.

- Feedback has been based on the experience and knowledge of a range of stakeholders, most of whom were children, and the use of recorded monitoring and evaluation from the Playwork staff.
- A constant theme emerging throughout the process of involvement and consultation was an awareness of children's extensive capacity and competency in expressing their views, experiences and their expectations, and a belief that these would find expression through the obligations of adults and the supposed power they possessed in the lives and delivery of both services and activities for children.
"It is always adults who tell you what to do". Child age 11.
- One of the overwhelming aspects emerging from this evaluation process is the pure and unadulterated emotional content of what children feel about their playing and their own commitment to it. Because of this they believe adults should also demonstrate the same level of commitment.

More specifically the information and material has been obtained from:

- Detail drawn from the monitoring of existing open access play provision by The Play Team. ie. Log books, conversations, observations.
- Specific statements about aspects of Open Access Play Provision in Bradford District emerging from consultation with children, young people and some parents and carers and local residents.
- Limited findings obtained from the research field of open access play provision.
- Use of the "Every Child Matters Agenda" as a template to identify the importance of and impact upon children and their families of open access play provision.

Note: Every Child Matters: Change for Children

The Government's 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' strategy, published in December 2004, provides a national framework to guide change at local authority level. The ten-year strategy for early years and childcare was published at the same time. Together, these documents set out the bigger picture in terms of national and local change. The five main outcomes (which are further sub-divided into 25 aims) for children and young people, described as key to well-being in childhood and later life, are:

- Being healthy.
- Staying safe.
- Enjoying and achieving.

- ❑ Making a positive contribution.
- ❑ Achieving economic well-being.

It imposes a duty on local authorities to make arrangements to promote co-operation between agencies to improve children's well-being and on key partners to co-operate with this. Changes signaled, and the ten year strategy, include the following:

- ❑ Improvement and integration of universal services in early years settings, schools and the health service.
(An indication regarding the difficulties likely to be encountered in achieving a universal services approach was confronted when the location of a pod in Ilkley next to a primary school was challenged by the head teacher. She felt that the pod and its related activities were providing little in the form of children's structured play other than to let children 'run wild'. The existence of the pod remained uncertain). A clash of professional ideals, or limitations to 'joined up thinking?'
- ❑ More specialized help and early intervention.
- ❑ More integrated front-line services and multi-disciplinary teams.
- ❑ More leadership at all levels. Shared multi-agency responsibility to safeguard children.
- ❑ Listening to children, young people/their families in planning provision. (It is this element that has particular resonance for the specific development of open access play provision and more broadly a designated Play Service)

OPEN ACCESS PLAY PROVISION: LINKS TO THE EVERY CHILD MATTERS AGENDA.

BE HEALTHY: The evidence gained from observations and discussions with children attending the play pods clearly identified how play opportunities dominates the health of children. The very physical nature of the play types demonstrated by children seemed to provide clear examples of how open access play provision contributes to children's health. The Playwork staff constantly demonstrated the importance of children planning and organizing their own play activities. This is a key aspect for children to be in control of their own health by developing their own play agenda.

STAY SAFE: Open access provision enables children to make choices, take decisions, manage risk and create challenges for themselves while all the time operating in the safe environment of a supervised play setting. This enables children to develop confidence and self esteem. It is this aspect that was constantly demonstrated by many of the children who attended the play pods.

ENJOY AND ACHIEVE: The play pods provided children with opportunities to experience a range of different activities. As described by one member of the Playwork staff "*these might be 'run of the mill' play activities to some children, but many of these children would not experience some of these activities anywhere else*". Taking apart a computer key board and using the elements for other play

activities was considered by some both enjoyable and an achievement whilst others perceived it as destructive.

MAKING a POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION: Open access play provision, such as the play pods provide a major contribution to both community activity and the children's own identity of themselves as members of that community. The play behaviors observed around the provision provided rich evidence of how children use settings such as this to shape their own childhood culture. The example of how friendships and enmities were managed was evidence of how children contribute to creating the culture of their open access play world. On many occasions they were seen to be playing in open public areas. This is noted as making a clear and positive contribution to their communities.

ACHIEVE ECONOMIC WELLBEING: Open access play provision offers children a menu of possibilities that enhances their development and emotional well-being. Examples drawn from observations and discussion with children, staff and parents indicated a strong belief in children developing an understanding of group dynamics. There seemed to be regularity to the small group discussions amongst the children who attended the provision. These events were subtly 'managed' and encouraged by the Playwork staff. Emerging from this are clear opportunities for children to develop tolerance, patience and to wrestle with complex emotional experiences. By using play as the vehicle within a setting that offers a sense of freedom children will develop a belief in themselves that provides them with future stability and a wider understanding of the complexities of relationships.

The evaluation work and consultation with children undertaken in this project parallels similar work completed elsewhere in the UK which demonstrates a strong demand by children and young people for places to go and things to do. Play has a vital and positive role in improving the quality of life, promoting children's well-being and building community cohesion.

The evidence gained from the project report could be used to increase or raise the profile and importance of open access play provision and make it a central element in the children's services agenda for the Bradford District.

"THE RIGHT TO PLAY IS THE CHILD'S FIRST CLAIM ON THE COMMUNITY. NO COMMUNITY CAN INFRINGE THAT RIGHT WITHOUT DOING DEEP AND ENDURING HARM TO THE MINDS OF ITS CITIZENS". David Lloyd George, National Playing Fields Association. 1925.

Our society may have changed considerably in the period since this claim was first made. However, there is something timeless and highly relevant in its message. Maybe this is an idea that is having its moment again! Maybe its sentiment should never have disappeared. Nevertheless, the statement is

enduring but possesses enormous relevance to the availability and purpose of open access play provision within communities across Bradford. More pertinently, it bears witness to many of the children's views about the need and enjoyment they get from 'playing out' in their communities. They may not express their feelings in the way that Lloyd George did but children's views about their own playing are equally eloquent and purposeful.

FACTORS AND FINDINGS EMERGING FROM THE EVALUATION.

The development, existence and impact of open access play provision within the City of Bradford Metropolitan Council area are dependent on a number of central factors. The following headings have emerged from the detail offered in the daily evaluation sheets of Playwork staff working on the 'pod sights' and from observations/discussions with children, parents and a few members of the communities where the pods were placed.

(These are not listed in order of importance)

- Resources
- Types of play behaviours.
- Type of community
- Locations/spaces
- Weather
- Numbers of attendees
- Accessibility of provision
- Trained staff and skilled staff. (The two are often different!)
- Views and opinions of users.
- Views and opinions of non users.
- Getting the message to a broad audience.

These factors will now be dealt with through a series of statements. Many of them are inevitably and inextricably linked. Each factor is important. Some overlap in comment will be evident.

RESOURCES.

The very nature of open access play provision requires a level of flexibility in its resources that are often difficult to meet. The acquisition and installation of containers or 'pods' provides an identity that can be describe as 'leaving its mark on the community.' These might be better described as creating 'play spots'. It is the place where children are likely to gravitate in order to meet their play needs. Even when the pod is not open it seems that children choose to play nearby to them.

Because of the temporary nature of the pods the equipment and play resources held within the containers also seemed to lack permancy. Some residents considered this temporary nature to be unacceptable. One parent suggested that the loss of the pod (by fire?!) was perhaps a good thing because *'it could have become a bit of an eyesore'*. This comment

was justified by the observation that the children and young people could now 'get inside 'the youthy' when they wanted'. This seemed to contradict the children's views. Many of whom when interviewed perceived the 'pods' as quite unique and were enthusiastic at the thought of visiting other pod sites in Bradford. One child even suggested that they could have football matches against each other. A 'pod league'! Boy age 10.

Other aspects relating to resources link firmly to a continuity or constancy of such open access provision. The nature of such provision demands that it is 'shaped' by the times that it is open and the staff who are present. Not one child suggested that having the pods open all the time would be useful. However, a number did suggest that sometimes they 'forgot 'the pod' would be open' and planned to do something else. (Girl age 9.) Others were happy with the provision being open 'when it was warmer and you could do more things when it was lighter'. (Girl age 9.)

Most children were convinced that an important element regarding the provision were the Playwork staff. 'They let us do what we want and are just there'. (Girl age 9.)

It seems the message is one of ambivalence. The pod as a resource possesses a series of contradictions. A positive aspect is that children identify with both the pod and the Playworkers who are present. However, this has major implications for staffing. Parents and residents are rather less positive about the provision as a resource. Clearly some view it as a resource that has potential to be vandalised, 'especially on dark nights'. Others perceive it as a useful but part time facility which inevitably bring with it problems of continuity and identity.

Management of the pods by local partners may require further commitment and development on the part of the play team. Incremental development may be the key approach here. Patience being the vehicle!

PLAY BEHAVIOURS.

When children were playing around the pods and at the adventure playground they were observed doing a range of things:

they talked and conversed, laughed, ran, jumped, hid, told fibs', imagined, invented, held hands, they pushed, cuddled, smiled a lot, concentrated, they were building things, they broke things: sometimes on purpose, sometimes by accident, there were fights and arguments, they organised, created rules, broke rules, destroyed things, they were anarchists, and politicians, they were designers and architects, they made enemies and became friends, they were carers.... and so much more.

The exciting aspect about open access play provision is that it doesn't allow children to be shut up into a play world which separates their play world from real life or from the social reality that surrounds their play situation. It enables them to constantly connect with the real world whilst remaining in control of their own temporary removal from it. The strength of the 'pod' and the adventure playground experience is that the play behaviours that children demonstrate illustrate their social understanding and their readiness to take part in social interaction. It is in this context that we see play being used as a resource for participation in everyday life. (Corsaro, 1985. Goodwin 1990). The process of re-playing and re-creating, what on the surface may appear to the onlooker to be a simplistic activity is for the child moments and experiences that can shape both their personality their day and possibly their whole life. Open access play provision offers children control over when, where, who, with and for how long they want to play. The decision making, if not all of the time, is mostly in their hands. This is a powerful element and should not be underestimated. It has the ability to both enable and ennoble the child.

TYPE OF COMMUNITY, LOCATION AND SPACE.

The importance of where open access play provision is located cannot be underestimated. The chosen venues for the pods within the Bradford district provide not only indicators of just how varied and broad the spectrum of adult attitudes to children and young people are but also how children choose to identify with the pods. Moreover, the venues are an illustration of the variability and rich pageant of communities and cultures within the Bradford district.

The opportunity for children to access space and experience a sense of freedom is central to the philosophy of open access play provision. The difficulties emerge when adults observe children who are either roaming, wandering, drifting, exploring, sitting, talking etc which is often interpreted as 'non-productive' or threatening activity. This type of play was best illustrated when a group of children attending a pod session chose to wander, or extend their play range to a small 'beck' which had previously been perceived as 'out of range'. (See earlier text). Adult passers-by were observed with frowns of concern that these children were 'feral' in their behaviour. Another adult described the children as '*just running around a lot and not appearing to be doing anything useful*'.

It is this very act of choosing to extend their play range that makes open access play exciting and challenging on the one hand and on the other, inevitably difficult for many adults to comprehend and appreciate.

The Criteria for the location of Play Pods (BEYCS) identifies four categories:

- Evidence of local play need among school age children.
- Suitability of proposed location.
- Partnership potential.

- Non-disruption of other play and child care providers.

It would appear that each of the locations within the Bradford district have been carefully selected with clear and purposeful preparation.

The emergence of antagonisms towards children and young peoples' provision is not a new phenomenon. This project inevitably attracted its share of concerns, lack of understanding, and basic but unreasonable objections from local residents. It is worthwhile identifying that this did not deter both the children and those adults who are committed to the projects. Whilst this is admirable those involved must be concerned that the projects experienced such aggressive resistance. (97 names from a housing estate signed a petition to stop the installation of the play pod.) This inevitably will shape questions about the sustainability of the pods within some of the locations.

It is not surprising that those adults who challenge the idea of children playing out in the public domain are often those who complain that children are obese and spend too much time 'sat in front of the TV'. How these contradictory attitudes are coped with must unavoidably question the possibility of locally based provision being required in this area or its placement being successful.

This is the 'flip side' of making provision for children' play.

Sadly and inevitably, it is not everybody's choice.

The evidence is apparent from both observations and through evident antagonism towards both children and their play provision.

The considerable challenge that the location of the pod met with is not surprising. It provides us with a snapshot of a national malaise, which is that children and young people are not to be trusted. In spite of the negativity the pod seemed to survive, albeit with a small but fluctuating number of children attending. *"From small acorns grow large oaks! The next time it may well be an easier ride."* A local resident.

Observing adults watching the pods from afar provides us with enough evidence which suggests to them that allowing children to 'run free' is not right.

On one particular occasion an approach was made to an adult walking her dog across the path of 'pod activity'. She was asked if this was a regular route that she used to walk her dog, to which she replied *"yes, it had been until I noticed on occasions that more and more children were using this area to play."* When asked if she was aware of what the pod was doing there. Her reply was driven by the words 'wild', 'out of control', and 'mindless activity'.

The sense of a space and its value that can be fostered through the availability of open access play provision and the application of playwork skills has the potential to transform unloved and unused play spaces into

positive experience-rich ones. Although a menu of inappropriate skills, poor application and negative responses from adult residents with their own agenda can have the reverse effect.

The importance of training for staff to gain experience to assist in their understanding of how children play cannot be over estimated. It is not sufficient to understand why play is important. This can only be done by ensuring that open access play provision is available within a broader range of play services. It is in open access play venues that we observe such richness in children's play. This in turn provides opportunities to understand what it is that children do when they are playing and when they are able to choose what it is they want to do.

There is increasing evidence that a broad spectrum of approaches to providing open access play provision and activity is gathering momentum. It is likely to shape the agenda of children's play well into the future. The Open Access movement is a crucial ingredient of this menu.

PLAYWORKERS.

A straightforward but vital point needs to be made at this point in the report. Whatever success can be claimed in terms of delivery and availability of open access play provision within the City of Bradford much of this success would appear to be due to the commitment to these schemes by the Playwork staff involved and those children and their parents who place great 'use value' on the projects, but more importantly recognise the crucial contribution that such provision makes to their communities. The sense of space, openness and freedom that can be experienced through open access play provision and the importance fostered through the application of Playwork skills has the potential to transform open spaces or often un-loved play spaces ('The Ashy' at Scholemoor) into positive experience-rich ones. It must also be remembered that inappropriate skills and poor application can have the reverse effect.

What this provision offers Playworkers is the opportunity to 'cross the divide' into parks and open spaces to introduce and facilitate activities and different kinds of play, for example, environmental play (whatever that might be!) or natural play. These Playworkers, or the increasingly used term Community Play Rangers are able to provide a trusted adult for children to talk to, to legitimise children's use of space, both in the eyes of the local residents and the children themselves, and can help children 'take ownership' and reclaim inappropriately used spaces.

When children were asked if they knew what Playworkers did the responses were highly illustrative:

"No we don't know what they do but there is (Playworkers named) who get things out for us. We do art things which is different from school and its my favourite. (Girl age 13).

"They play with you and argue and debate" (Boy age 12).

"They cook well!" (Girl aged 11.)

"They try and help you but sometimes its' really annoying. (Girl age 12)

What clearly emerges through the comments of children and the increasing body of knowledge that supports the Playwork profession which is increasingly used by Playworkers, is that much of what children would like to do but are often prevented from doing is shaped and driven by adults imposing sanctions, rules or fears for children's safety and therefore, not surprisingly, their own.

"I had only ever heard of play not Playworkers. But I know what they do now!" (Girl age 10).

"They are just kind people" (Boy aged 9)

"If you get on with the Playworkers it's better for you, you can get to know them and that's good. (Boy age 13)

ATTENDANCES.

The numbers attending the pod sessions and the adventure playground are difficult to calculate. Some of the pods were able to record numbers attending over the period they were open by keeping a register of names. Being able to 'count' heads is vital to any further argument regarding the success and sustainability of such projects. It is however interesting to note that the philosophy of open access provision is partly shaped by the flexibility of attendance. How many attend and when should possibly be of little concern. However, the determinant factor for 'counting heads' is seemingly and almost always, safety and care.

It is also important to identify that the weather and time of year influences attendances in a significant way. These are aspects that cannot be changed but must be adapted to.

It became evident that some children enjoyed the excitement of playing in the dark others were either reluctant to attend or their parents were unhappy about their children 'playing out' in the dark. One parent suggested that "The Youthy' was a better place for the children to come to because they were able to be inside on dark nights" (Parent). Children, when asked if the 'Youthy' stopped them being able to play out in the dark indicated that it provided them with both opportunities and that they could choose. It became clear that an age divide was the determining factor that decided whether you played outside in the dark. Generally if you were under 10 you stayed inside. 'The dark is for the big ones'. (Girl age 8.)

Overall the numbers attending two sites seem to justify the existence of the pods.

Wibsey = 112 attendances between August 2006 - Feb 2007.

Eastwood = attendances between August 2006- October 2006.

These are the only recorded numbers that are available.

VIEWS OF USERS.

The views and opinions of users of the provision are offered by both the child and adult perspective.

Adult views.

"The play pod provides a safe environment for relaxed and informal play".

"The play pod provides a focus for outdoor play for young children in their immediate locality".

"My own sons (age 12 and 8) have benefited from attending the play pod. It has given them independence, confidence to play and meet new friends in an outdoor setting. They love going!"

"In our community children seem to like playing near where they live".

These are a few of the positive comments made by a parent in support of a play pod.

In reaction to the 'threat' of a pod being located in a community a local resident wrote challenging a signed petition whose aim was to resist the birth of the project;

"I am concerned that residents have been 'painted' with a very bleak outcome from 'hooded, rampant, drug fuelled teenagers' running out of control over the site every night, to a graffiti covered building going up the other side of my fence. Goodness me these are our children we are talking about, not a species from outer space".

Children's views.

With the threat of closure to a play pod a child wrote;

"I am writing to inform you that the play pod should stay open because we haven't done anything wrong to make you angry. We have always stayed in the car park like we are supposed to do". (Boy age 11.)

"Every estate should have something like this pod" (Girl age 9).

"When I am here I don't play with anyone special because everyone seems to play" (Boy age 10).

"I don't want my parents to come here with me 'cause they would embarrass me but I understand why some children want their parents to come". (Girl age 11).

*"This is about the best place to come and play but it isn't open enough".
(Boy age 10)*

*"I sometimes come here on my own and then meet my friends here" (Girl
age 10).*

*"The staff are really nice here. They get you food and they just let you play".
(Boy age 11.)*

*"The pod should be open at least on another night in the week. Sunday
mornings and afternoons would be good!" (Boy age 12.)*

*"We like playing here together. My mum and her mum are friends" (Girl
age 9.)*

*"We come and sit here because this is where you can have memories"
(girl age 8) At the adventure playground.*

*"One of the good things about the pod is you can eat while you are
playing" (Boy age 11)*

RESEARCH MATERIAL

The research evidence is now pretty clear. A lack of good play provision and play opportunities can have far reaching detrimental consequences on families and communities and their neighbourhoods.

Open access play provision provides real opportunities for children to reclaim parts of their communities that have been taken from them. Mayer Hillman (1993) clearly demonstrated the loss of independent mobility experienced by children over the previous 25 years. Hillman stated that;

"Children are increasingly being denied a basic right – to get around on their own...Playing in the street and getting about in their local neighbourhood – a traditional locus of children's social and recreational activities and experiences – are more often than not forbidden to them. Allied to this the restrictions, have required parents to spend a steadily rising amount of time escorting and 'minding' their children."

It is noted that whilst not all the children who attended the open access provision were escorted there by parents. However, many did arrive by themselves or with groups of friends. The opportunity to develop a sense of independence and with it freedom is central to a child's sense of self and to their understanding of the world beyond their immediate family. Getting to the pod 'under your own steam' is an important step in the process of gaining independence.

A significant report produced by Community Care in 1999 (September 2- 8th) Parents Under Pressure, identified the importance of good play and leisure facilities as important elements in helping to reduce the 'risk' factors in children's lives. It stated that networks of community support: living in a supportive and safe community: a peer group which is pro-social: and schools where children are valued and learning is encouraged, these were identified as essential ingredients assisting in protecting children who may, in some situations face adverse circumstances.

Further support is offered by the work of Uri Bronfenbrenner's The Ecology of Human Development, (1979). Here it is suggested that every aspect of our lives, from birth to death, are interlinked by a network of organisations and institutions whose aim is to ensure our nurturing and safety which in turn provides communities of interest. Should one element of this network collapse then its fine human ecological balance can subject us and our communities to potential disintegration. The MICRO, the MESO, the EXO and the MACRO are all levels which describe the human experience. At the heart of this network is provision for children which can in turn describe play provision. Without such provision our communities are weakened and therefore threatened.

However, when community play facilities are evident and available they are considered to form part of the "glue" that brings communities and families together. (Best Play: What Play Provision should do for Children 2000).

Play opportunities promote a sense of community, well-being and security. Research by the New Economics Foundation demonstrates that play provision can connect people and lead to greater trust. There are measurable benefits to local interaction, . Friendships networks, community know-how and community safety. Children and young people who are absorbed in their play are also less likely to be viewed as a nuisance to others.

Moreover, Making the Case for Play (2002) highlights that children and young people prefer open spaces, indicating they like to play in public outdoor areas where they can meet friends and maintain some autonomy away from adult supervision whilst simultaneously knowing that having an understanding adult (Playworker) nearby to advocate on their behalf when needed is crucial to their well-being.

When not in the care of adults, children play in:

- Parks and recreation grounds
- The streets near their home
- Local open spaces
- School grounds.
- And also...in their own homes and gardens!

Emerging from this evaluation report and directly linking to Making the Case for Play is that we now know when consulted about their play, leisure and recreational preferences children and young people and their parents constantly expressed a need to be able to access these facilities in a convenient setting, often close to or within their own communities. The outdoors figured largely in the expressed needs of children and young people.

Why is it that until recently so much emphasis has been placed on the experience of indoor play? Could it be that in the last forty years we have created a generation 'private children'. Removed from the 'public domain' our society has seemingly lost sight of what children really enjoy when they are playing.

Mathews, Limb and Taylor (2000) provide compelling data that counters the idea that children and young people have retreated in doors. (This includes children aged 9-11). They argue that many children and young people rely heavily on outdoor spaces during their free time. The street is seen as a setting where children and young people can 'play out their social life, largely unfettered by adults'. This provides further evidence that 'pods' have a role to play in meeting the social and recreational needs of a range of children.

However, within the context of a highly commoditized societal culture, where both the play of children and their childhoods are concerned, and where the market element is high on the agenda, there are other aspects of community based play provision that need to be recognised. Getting Serious about Play (2001) identified that play projects, like other free community based provision, are unlikely to be able to generate significant income. The report identified five elements that signify good provision. These could be adopted to help shape open access play provision in Bradford district. They are:

- V-Value Based
- I- In the right place
- T- Top Quality
- A- Appropriate
- L- Long Term

Hence the long term future of play projects is likely to depend upon embedding them into local community play provision.

It is evident that within this context we are more likely to see an equalizing of the play experience for children and young people. Inevitably, striking the right balance between open access play (free) and structured play activities (controlled and often cost related) is crucial to the delivery of a worthwhile and accessible play service for all.

Open access play provision can be a space, some facilities, equipment, asset, or activities intended to offer children the opportunity to play freely in a self determined and expressive way. At its most successful, it offers children and young people as much free choice, freedom and control over their play as possible within reasonable boundaries. This can often be best achieved with adult support, guidance or supervision. The role of Playworkers and their professional skills should not be underestimated in this context.

It is exactly this type of provision that The Pods are providing.

Pod player and 'attendee' age 9 "If I walk to the pod it takes me seven minutes but if I run it takes me five minutes".

Play is often perceived as a separate world that children inhabit away from the darkness of the adult world.

But, play and playing CAN be perceived as not a separate children's world: by using play children intrude – enter - wander in and out of on adult order and can intrude on the power of adults over children therefore rendering this power useless and weak.

It is this very approach that the POD EXPERIENCE specifically provides children with and an experience for adults to cope with, understand and learn from.

"The sight and sound of children playing out is a sign of a healthy community." Anon.

This is an often heard comment (maybe now a lament!) but how much truth is in the statement?

There can be no mistaking the need within any community regeneration/development agenda that children's play needs must be a central element on which this should take place. Here we return to the importance of Uri Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development to emphasise the importance of children's play provision as a core aspect of a nurturing and caring community that understands and treasures children and their play needs.

A considerable number of local authorities who have submitted play strategies through the BIG lottery process are embracing and developing projects and approaches to open access play. These often take the form of Play Rangers, Mobile play projects, detached play provision, environmental Playwork, (which borrows from the Forest School movement). (Strategic Enabling Role, 2006/2007)

The focus on open access play provision may, at one end of the spectrum be driven by simple economics. It is perceived as an easy option which meets the basic requirements of play provision. (Fixed play equipment). At the other end of the spectrum where the 'Pod Experience' might be located is the opportunity to stake a claim to regenerating communities and creating facilities that meet the expressed needs of children and young people. Open access provision, with professional staff trained and educated in recognising what it is that children want through their playing, can change the shape, meaning and purpose of a community to its children.

CONCLUSION.

There is clear evidence that the open access play provision which, in part is in place and beginning to flourish (Eccleshill Adventure Playground) and the Play Pod project which needs further adjusting, must be sustained. This will require

patience, commitment and belief. There is real evidence that this specific project approach possesses enormous potential. It may have attracted only small numbers in its initial stages. This is a beginning. To remove these 'pods' now would be detrimental, not only to the children who have committed to them, but to the communities/neighbourhoods that have witnessed them and need to see them more.

There is evidence that the social class structure of certain communities have a perception of these projects as unnecessary provision. "These projects are a waste of taxpayers money." Local resident. But it is from within these communities where negative attitudes prevail that can often produce surprising change.

If the pods are to be successful then the management and maintenance of them needs to be more community based. A sense of ownership will increase the possibility of acceptance. Volunteer capacity needs to be increased. None of this is new or indeed 'epoch breaking!'

The Play Pods have clearly provided children, in some instances with a unique and exciting opportunity to be outdoors, shouting, being seen but most of all being children. This should be encouraged and where it is frowned upon explanations should be provided.

"My dad says it is OK to shout when you are outdoors because the birds are deaf and they can't hear you. But if I do it indoors it gives him a headache". (Boy age 8).

If there is one negative aspect of open access play provision which we should be aware of it is that there is a tendency for children to develop not only a sense of identity with their 'pod' but also a specific territoriality. We live in a culture where children and young people will often gain and develop their identity by 'belonging' to something. Maybe we should view this as strength? Sadly it can be also be a weakness. It is with this aspect in mind that the Playworkers skill becomes vital. These strengths should be nurtured and encouraged.

The Playwork staff attached to open access play provision are intensely aware that it offers children and young people a chance to broaden their play skills repertoire and experience play activities that will assist them in later life. Moreover, the very existence of such provision sends a clear and loud message to communities that opportunities for outdoor play is being provided and is central to a healthy and sustainable community.

We need to remind ourselves that children who have spent a great deal of their childhood playing will have inside them inner strengths which no-one will ever be able to take away from them, however hard their lives turn out to be. It is the very existence of open access play provision, the like of which is offered by the Play Pods that can provide these inner strengths.

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