



# **LEWES DISTRICT COUNCIL**

## **PLAY STRATEGY *DRAFT 1***

March 2007

## INTRODUCTION

This draft Play Strategy for Lewes District has been prepared by Rob Wheway, Play Consultant of CAPT.

It is designed to assist Lewes District Council ensure that the children of the District have a sufficient quantity and quality of play opportunities both in the short and long term.

It is part of a process by which Lewes District Council can apply for funds from the Big Lottery Fund to further the aims of its Play Strategy.

## PLAY

Play is difficult to define. As everyone was a child at some time and played it is something that is easily recognised. However, any simple definition would probably include other activities which are not play. For example, 'Learning for Life' would also include schools.

The following, though not strictly speaking a definition, is widely accepted within the play field of explaining some of the crucial features of play and distinguishing it from other activities. It is accepted by the Children's Play Council

*Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child... Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter.*

The importance of play is recognised in the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

Through play children develop their social physical intellectual creative and emotional being.

Play England have also set another 'definition' which is three criteria which differentiate play from other activities. These are called the '**Three Frees**'.

These are that to be a true play opportunity it should be

- **free** of charge to participate
- **free** to come and go
- **free** to choose what they do whilst they are there

The CPC 'definition' and the Play England criteria clearly distinguish play from other activities such as School, Childcare, Organised Sport, Clubs, Recreational Lessons, (Music Lessons, Swimming, etc). Whilst these are all very worthwhile activities they are not play.

Much of the benefit of play comes from the fact that the children are doing it for themselves without adult interference or instruction. Working out who is 'on' and how to take fair turns and reach compromises are the basis of human civilisation and children continually practice this through the fun of playing. The important factor is they do it for fun and don't realise they are engaged in such sophisticated development.

Children do of course play indoors in their own homes and very young children can only play with adult supervision. These aspects of play fall outside the scope of this strategy.

## **PLAY – IT'S BIGGER THAN YOU THINK**

Play differs from all other leisure activities with which it tends to be lumped as it does not take place on specific days at specific times or for specific periods. It tends to be underestimated as it is equated with an adult activity such as playing for a football team or playing in a band which happens once or twice a week for some of the weeks in the year and for limited periods after work.

Children only go to school for approximately half the days in the year. The other days, holidays and weekends, are potentially free for play. On school days there is always time for play after school and except for winter this can be anything from a few minutes to six or so hours.

Play covers a very wide age group. Where it is safe to do so parents have always and still let their children play out from approximately 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years old upwards. At this stage it would usually be on the front step or in the front garden and often with a slightly older sibling or friend with the parent keeping the door open. At the older age of 15 or 16 years old, children take part in what are clearly identifiable play activities and are still regularly seen in children's playgrounds using the equipment.

Above that age, there is a transition to a more adult style of recreation, however informal play opportunities such as MUGA's (multi use games areas – contained ball games areas) and skateboard facilities are regularly used by young people into their early 20's and used in a way that fulfils the two play 'definitions'.

Besides being significantly bigger in time than school, play is not contained within a single profession.

Children's outdoor play takes place around their home environment and in the streets pavements and other elements of the public sphere within their own

neighbourhood. Those responsible for the design of neighbourhoods, those responsible for transport (pedestrian and vehicular) and those responsible for housing all have a significant influence on children's freedom to play within their own neighbourhood.

Children also play in designated places, eg, equipped playgrounds and on parks, playing fields and public open spaces. Those responsible for these areas predominantly Local Authority, Leisure or Parks Departments significantly influence children's freedom to play.

In addition, there are play workers and others such as Play Rangers whose role is to enable or enhance children's opportunities for play. The emphasis is on enabling the children to freely choose rather than to have a curriculum as is the case with teachers or youth workers.

### **CHILDREN'S PLAY "OPPORTUNITIES"**

The Play England and the big Lottery Fund have taken a significantly different approach from previous grant paid which has emanated from Government, Quango's or similar.

Each District Local Authority has to develop a play strategy and that strategy has to be based on 'outcomes' rather than 'outputs'.

Outputs are found by asking such questions as 'what are the number of equipped playgrounds, the variety of equipment', etc. Improvements are then judged on increasing these numbers. It is simply and quantitative

Outcomes are found by asking such questions as 'can children play out, do they have opportunities to play in a variety of ways, etc.,' Improvements lie in the experience of the children, are more complex and qualitative.

In the Foreword to '*Planning for Play*', - the guidance from the Big Lottery Fund and the Children's Play Council, Adrian Voce, Director CPC states

'In 2004, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published the report of a review of children's play in England, chaired by Frank Dobson MP. This report, *Getting Serious About Play*, made recommendations on the use of National Lottery funding for 'improving children's play opportunities' through a new, dedicated children's play programme.'

The term 'opportunities' is very deliberate and is different from 'provision'. It is designed to ensure that the focus is not on facilities and outputs but on children's freedom to play as an outcome.

He further states:

‘The aim of this guidance is that a consideration of children’s need to play becomes part of the strategic policy framework for all decisions that affect the planning and design of both children’s services and public space into the future.’

This emphasises that the strategy should not be restricted to designated play provision but all those places where children can or should be free to play.

We therefore come to the conclusion that what is needed is not facilities but an environment for play.

## **AN ENVIRONMENT FOR PLAY**

The play strategy should aim to create an environment for play.

An environment for play would be one where the design and traffic management of residential areas would be such that the vast majority of children would be able to play out in front of their own homes from 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years old upwards.

Children from about the age of 5 years upwards would be able to play out within sight of their own home and take advantage of play opportunities available, eg. friend’s front garden, wide verge, small patch of amenity green space, hard standing in front of garages, and of course the street and pavement itself.

From about 8 years of age, children would be able to visit friends who live within the same estate and visit play opportunities such as equipped playgrounds, public open space, a copse and other natural areas which may be 400-500 metres travelling distance from their home.

Within that environment features of the public realm such as ‘natural’ or planted areas, parks, playgrounds and communal space would be designed or managed to enable children to enjoy a wide variety of play elements, eg running around, hiding, imaginative, creative, social, etc.

Children’s opinions and points of view would be considered in a way that is appropriate to them and where conflicts arose between their use and adult use of the environment, they would be engaged positively in mediating those disputes.

## **BACKGROUND IN LEWES DISTRICT**

Within Britain, Local Authorities operate under the principle ‘*ultra vires*’ that is, they have to operate within legal constraints set down by Central Government.

It is clear that successive governments have tended to regard play as a defined organised activity, which it is not, and have urged Local Authorities to measure play purely in terms of output.

Lewes District Council has been no more immune from these constraints and type of direction than any other local authority.

A simple example is that when the Audit Commission devised the indicators for play, it asked local authorities to measure them against the NPFA's LAP, LEAP, NEAP criteria. Whether or not the children were using the playgrounds was not a factor to be considered, neither was any idea of whether the playground met the children's preferences.

By using the criteria quite narrowly it meant that a local authority could improve its score if it removed all equipment from a play area near to people's homes (LAP). It also meant that a very well used playground within sight of the children's homes might fail to meet the LEAP criteria yet a slightly bigger one which was hardly used at all, because of a poor location, could pass the criteria.

The Audit Commission used this process in the full knowledge that one of the severest criticisms of local authorities is that they have a history of measuring outputs rather than outcomes and that this leads to poor management and a waste of resources.

One of the main documents for children's play in Lewes District is the 'Outdoor Playing Space Review' prepared by PMP who are following the example and guidance set by government.

In that document, playgrounds sit uneasily with such things as football pitches and tennis courts. Use of pitches is significantly different from use of play opportunities. As the reports states '*football, cricket and rugby teams play a home match every fortnight*' (in the season assumed) whereas children's play is a daily activity and not at set times.

Whereas the report considers the demand for sports pitches, no assessment is made of children's demand, existing or potential, for play facilities. The assessment is made purely on the amount of space available using the NPFA 6 acre standard and consideration is not given to the accessibility of that space.

Taking it's lead from government the report quotes from a government document *Game Plan (Dec 2002)* published jointly by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It sets out to '*combat the couch potato culture*'. Yet as far as children are concerned, there is no evidence of a 'couch potato culture'. Observations of children together with consultations reveal that they are instinctively active and want to play out. What there is is a car culture which means that the majority of our roads are unsafe for children to be able to play out and consequently the exercise they take is dramatically reduced from that which would have been the case 50 or

100 years ago. In other words in tackling obesity in children, the government strategy is misguided.

Other government advice such as PPG17: Planning for open space, sport and recreation appear helpful in promoting opportunities for children's play as this extract from a Lewes District document 'Sustainability Appraisal P59 Background paper' demonstrates:

- i. promote accessibility by walking, cycling and public transport, and ensure that facilities are accessible for people with disabilities;
- ii. locate more intensive recreational uses in sites where they can contribute to town centre vitality and viability;
- iii. avoid any significant loss of amenity to residents, neighbouring uses or biodiversity;
- iv. improve the quality of the public realm through good design;
- v. look to provide areas of open space in commercial and industrial areas;
- vi. add to and enhance the range and quality of existing facilities;
- vii. carefully consider security and personal safety, especially for children;
- viii. meet the regeneration needs of areas, using brownfield in preference to greenfield sites;
- ix. consider the scope for using any surplus land for open space, sport or recreational use, weighing this against alternative uses;
- x. assess the impact of new facilities on social inclusion; and
- xii. Consider the recreational needs of visitors and tourists.

However, closer inspection of PPG.17 and associated guidance indicate a dearth of understanding of how children play, the amount of time they spend playing and how local it nearly always is to their own home.

At the heart of PPG.17 is the consideration of transport and it states '*promote accessibility by walking, cycling....*'

If we turn to the reference to government document PPG13: Transport. It states:

1. promote more sustainable transport choices for both people and for

moving freight;

2. promote accessibility to jobs, shopping, leisure facilities and services by public transport, walking and cycling, and

3. Reduce the need to travel, especially by car.

This may appear helpful to children's play, however within PPG.13 and it's associated documents there is no evidence that government understands that children make a vast amount of journeys when they can play out.

Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Chartered Institute of Housing found that on an estate of 100 children, if only half could play out they would make 281,000 journeys per annum. These are '*non polluting and give healthy exercise*'. Unfortunately, as the vast majority are informal within the child's neighbourhood and not to a specific organised activity such as school or shopping, they are not considered to be transport.

In preparing it's Core Strategy Preferred Options as part of it's local development framework, Lewes District has followed the government's guidance. For example it aims '*To improve accessibility by public transport, walking and cycling, particularly to jobs but also facilities and services.*' It's focus is therefore on longer journeys to designated places, rather than the informal walking and cycling around a residential area which is part of play. There is nothing within the document which indicates how children's particular transport needs will be met.

It further states that '*in particular the provision of facilities for young people is important for health reasons as well as social reasons. The level of obesity has tripled in England in the past 20 years and trends suggest this will continue unless action is taken.*' The inference is that the provision of facilities rather than the creation of an environment for play will make a difference to the levels of obesity.

In play strategy terms therefore, Lewes District is failing it's own children. It is however, no worse than other local authorities as it is merely following the advice given by government as it is legally obliged to do.

As far as the provision of children's play areas is concerned, Lewes District has a reasonably good record. It is diligent in the maintenance of it's playgrounds and has them inspected for safety (often including additional assessments such as DDA) annually by independent organisations such as RoSPA and NPFA. The equipment appears to be generally well maintained.

Consultations are however, likely to reveal that children and parents feel that the equipment is insufficiently challenging and tending to be aimed at younger children rather than the full age range. There are exciting opportunities such as the Skate Park as all authorities,

Lewes District is faced with playgrounds which are in their present locations through the accident of history rather than through a rational planning process. There does however, appear to have been a culture of keeping playgrounds in open sites where parents and children would feel secure because they can be seen rather than hiding them away to keep children out of sight and out of mind.

Hiding sites away leads to children feeling insecure and therefore using the play facilities less and also makes the play facilities more vulnerable to vandalism.

## **PLAY PROVISION FOR THE 0-5 YEAR OLDS**

This report makes particular reference to a draft report from East Sussex County Council 'Integrated Play Provision'. It does so to avoid this age group falling between two stools because the District Council may believe that the County Council is taking responsibility for this age group.

Despite its name, this document has very little relevance to a play strategy. It concentrates on '*high quality developmental and therapeutic play opportunities*'.

Whilst what it details is clearly beneficial to children, it is nearly all guided by external curricula and the activities do not fulfil the two play 'definitions' detailed at the beginning of this report. The draft County report specifically states '*universal services will not necessarily be free*'.

The document makes no reference to children playing out in their gardens or in communal public space and no reference to traffic issues which prevent children under 5 playing out, nor does it make any reference to play provision which children might use informally.

In developing its strategy, Lewes District Council will therefore need to ensure that play for this age group is included.

## CONSULTATION IN LEWES

Consultation has been carried out for Lewes District in preparation for its local development framework and other documents

When looking at the sustainability of settlements the Background Paper states

**What we were told as a result of consultation:**

Throughout all the consultation exercises the lack of facilities for young people came up often and was an important issue.

and the community strategy again based on consultation states:

**What the Community Strategy says:**

One of the aims of the Community Strategy is to improve local facilities. In addition, the local partnerships have identified the following issues;

**Newhaven:** Working with young people in Newhaven to improve and make better use of existing facilities and working with other partners to find ways of funding new facilities. Working with partners in Newhaven & Peacehaven to develop a 'SureStart Programme' to give children aged 0-4 and their parents access to better services.

**Lewes:** Youth and Community Facilities.

**Peacehaven and Telscombe:** Better Community Facilities.

**Seaford:** Identifies need for better facilities for young people.

**Rural:** Improved opportunities for young people

These consultation findings are significant for the play strategy, however, the results of the consultations need further unpicking.

It is common for local authorities to get this response from consultations and the solution appears to be that they should provide more facilities.

What people actually say when responding to the consultations is either

we want somewhere safe for children to play

or

we want somewhere where the young people can go

Further research at other authorities has consistently found that these answers cover a variety of desires.

Firstly, parents say that they want somewhere safe for their children to play, if they are then asked where they let their children play, they typically answer 'not out of my sight'. With probing they will also say that they let their child play near a friend's house because they are then within sight of the friend's parent. What they therefore mean is that they want their child to be able to play out safely, not that they necessarily want a safe facility. A facility can

often only be provided out of their sight and no matter how “safe” it is will be unlikely to be used.

Secondly, by safe they do not mean unexciting. Both parents and children when describing local play areas tend to state that they are boring or not exciting enough. Parents want their children to have exciting facilities and expect their children to have the normal bumps and scrapes of childhood.

Thirdly, a proportion of those answering either do not like children or young people or are fearful of them and so want them anywhere else but here. Facilities are therefore not the answer as the children or young people will still be living nearby. Strategies of mediation are more likely to address their particular needs.

The Stakeholder meetings which were held were also a consultation. A number of issues were raised by the participants. These included:

- Tolerance needed by adults
- Ban extended schools – not meeting play needs
- Risk (challenging play) is good
- Ropes from trees should be allowed
- Play Rangers may be helpful
- Work with developers – planning rules (should include play)
- Maximise use of current space
- Traffic calming would help
- Take cars off roads
- Cycle access important
- All ages (of children) should be considered
- Parents (Dads and Mums) should be rewarded for being at home
- Fear (there is an atmosphere of)
- Small spaces are ok (are used by) for kids
- Hangout shelters are ok but cold in winter
- “No ball games” (approach is a problem)

## STRATEGY FOR PLAY

The over arching theme of Lewes District' strategy for play is that the authority should aim to create an environment for play.

This will be achieved by identifying key "Aims" and translating them into actions:

**Aim 1** – to enable children to play out and take advantage of all the play opportunities, both social and physical which their neighbourhood offers.

Lewes District will have a Planning assumption that in residential roads priority should be given to pedestrians. Excluded from this will be roads which fulfil a necessary distributory function. It is recognised that to achieve this in any significant way will require a change in national legislation. Lewes District Council will press for such changes but will where possible, use existing legislation and design to achieve the same end.

**Aim 2** – to dramatically increase the amount of play opportunities and play facilities available to children.

By carrying out 1 above, children's ranges (the distance they can travel unaccompanied) will be increased and they will therefore be able to access more of the facilities available. If a child's range is doubled, the area over which they can travel is potentially quadrupled. For the child accessing four times as many places is the same result as 4 times as many places being provided.

**Aim 3** – to ensure that designated play places, public open spaces, parks, etc. are accessible to children.

Using GIS, the catchment for each play place will be assessed. This will be based on travelling distance rather than radial distance as has been usual in the past. As a reasonably practicable proxy for children's range, the distance of unaccompanied travel to school may be used to assess the children's ranges and therefore the catchment for each facility.

**Aim 4** – to ensure that children living outside the catchment of public play places have play opportunities.

Children will be consulted about their play and where play deprivation exists the Authority will take steps to improve the play environment. Play deprivation exists where children wish to, but cannot, "play out".

**Aim 5** – to ensure that play facilities meet children's needs and to ensure that children feel a sense of ownership of their playground.

Children will be consulted about their local playground, involved in the design or modifications to that playground so that it meets their play needs. At periodic intervals of not more than 4 years the council will undertake specific activities at each playground to re-engage the children with the playground, to encourage a sense of community ownership and to allow for the changes in the children's ages.

**Aim 6** – to ensure that children's play is seen as a legitimate activity within each neighbourhood.

There will be a strategy of mediation to encourage both the children and adults to feel respect for each other and to understand each others needs.

**Aim 7** – to ensure that children have opportunities to play in more exciting and creative ways than would be their usual everyday experience.

Lewes District Council will promote and encourage playwork with children. This may be with playwork staff or as part of parental or neighbourly activity. It may be part of the role of staff who have other responsibilities. The enhance activities may include such things as cooking on an open fire, use of tools, arts and crafts, drama etc. The "Three Frees" criteria will apply.

**Aim 8** – to ensure that all children have opportunities to play .

Some children are restricted in their play by fear of ridicule or bullying, by parental fears, by isolation etc. Such fears may be based on disability, race, gender, sexual orientation but may also be personal to that individual and not based on them being part of a perceived minority. Lewes D.C. will reach out to these children in all the above aims and work with them and their parents to overcome prejudice and fears which are restricting their play. Where barriers to play are physical the council will take reasonable steps to overcome these.