Evaluation of Children's Play programme
Report to Big Lottery Fund

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ECOTEC Research & Consulting
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C3914 / May 2009

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Executive Summary

ECOTEC Research & Consulting are pleased to present this report of the Evaluation of the Children's Play programme to Big Lottery Fund. This is an interim report based on data collected in the first year of the three year evaluation.

Overview

The Children's Play programme is part of the Children's Play Initiative which is an investment of £155 million in play, with a key aim of raising the profile of play. The Big Lottery define play as “…what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons”. BIG are committing £124 million for Children's Play over three years including £123 million through its play programme that aims to create, improve and develop children and young people's free local play spaces. The programme focuses on the most deprived areas and provides funding for 351 local authority-led portfolios of 1,400 strategic projects delivered at a number of locations which form a cohesive strategy to achieving programme outcomes. Portfolios have been awarded between £100,000 to £3 million funding across capital and revenue funding.

The overall aim of the evaluation is to assess the impact of the Children's Play programme. The programme will provide a wide range of inclusive and accessible play opportunities on children's play and the evaluation will examine the difference that greater choice and control over play can have for children. Specifically it will address research objectives around what free play looks like in practice and what children's experiences are of it; how barriers to play are being removed and communities are being engaged.

Methodology

The evaluation runs for three years until August 2011 and involves a range of quantitative and qualitative research approaches including: case study visits to 20 portfolios, surveys of portfolios, projects and beneficiaries; and desk based analysis of programme level monitoring data and portfolio evaluations. Case studies are both snapshot and longitudinal and involve arrange of interactive techniques to collect children’s feedback. This report is based on feedback from the first five months of the evaluation including the first four case studies and desk based research.
Key findings

- The evaluation evidence available to date illustrates that BIG’s Children’s Play programme is supporting a concept of ‘free play’ which is generally welcomed by children and young people in supporting them to try new things and be creative, as well as providing them with something they recognised did not exist before. Definitions of free play generally incorporate the ‘three frees’ and support children to undertake self directed play for its own sake.

- The programme is allowing more children to access more play than they had been able to access before and to access new forms of play (e.g. sensory play, natural or adventurous play) than were previously available. For example the majority of portfolios report they have increased the number of children and young people accessing play opportunities (82%); suggesting that the majority of portfolios are meeting the most common outcome around ‘More children taking part in a wider range of good play experiences’. A further three quarters feel they have increased the number of free open access play opportunities (76%)\(^1\).

- Free play however is an aspiration for portfolios and projects and cannot always be achieved due to barriers particularly for children with disabilities who cannot experience free play to its fullest extent without additional support. There have also been implications for project staff of free play models including difficulties controlling children’s behaviour and local vandalism of free play areas. Generally projects are supporting children to have choice over their play – around choosing the format or content of a play area or by choosing the activities once they get there.

- The programme is targeting approximately 17 different target groups of children and young people. And while the majority of the programme’s activity is broad based (69% are offering provision for all children)\(^2\) around a third of portfolios are more specifically focussed on disabled children, rural areas or disadvantaged areas in particular. In some cases, portfolios are helping disadvantaged children such as those living in isolated areas where services cannot usually be delivered, or those with disabilities, to access play.

- The portfolios have used a wide range of techniques for engaging beneficiaries, including: surveys and questionnaires, forums and focus groups, events and public meetings, video diaries, graffiti walls and post it notes. There have been difficulties

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\(^1\) Evaluation of Play England - Local Authority Survey Year Three, NCB, Internal Report, 2009. Survey base = 163 local authorities

\(^2\) Source: ECOTEC’s analysis of BIG programme data
around engaging effectively with all target groups and work is still to be done to reach some communities, for example traveller communities. So far there is limited evidence of any really innovative means of engaging with children and young people, although portfolios have been strong on ensuring an inclusive nature and using multi methods to engage and recognise that BIG funding has enabled them the capacity to do so.

- The portfolios are often aiming to provide children with opportunities to take risks and challenge themselves, particularly in outdoor settings, or using physical equipment (e.g. assault courses), but this often has to be negotiated within the local authorities themselves and with local communities. Issues have included getting and maintaining top level support for play as a whole, and also support for the ‘new’ concept of ‘free play’ which incorporates higher levels of risk than are usually acceptable.

- Local authorities report that they are on track with delivering their portfolios (90%) and the majority have at least one project under way. The majority also report that their work to date in this area has raised the profile of play (90%)\(^1\). Nearly half of local authorities had used BIG funding to secure extra funding for play (48%) through a range of sources including government departments and local grants. Sustainability was a key issue for play.

- Going forwards, only around half of portfolios felt their facilities were sustainable, and many felt that ongoing top level support and dedicated staff were necessary to ensure this. For example in smaller portfolios, staff have taken on play alongside other aspects of their remit which makes it difficult to sustain the work beyond the life of funding. Promisingly, play partnerships in many cases seemed to be embedded within wider council structures such as children’s strategic partnerships and linked to relevant strategies.

**Next steps**

The next steps for the evaluation will be to refine the remainder of the methodology including surveys and select the remainder of the case study sample to ensure coverage of all research issues across the profile of portfolios. The evaluation will explore the value of gathering further monitoring information as the programme progresses and establishing what will be available at programme level versus case study level. It will also be important to consider dissemination of the early findings to share any early learning.

\(^1\) Evaluation of Play England - Local Authority Survey Year Three, NCB, Internal Report, 2009. Survey base = 163 local authorities
1.0 Introduction

ECOTEC Research & Consulting are pleased to present this report of the Evaluation of the Children's Play programme to the Big Lottery Fund. This document forms an interim report in the first year of the three year evaluation.

1.1 Background to the Children's Play Programme

The Big Lottery define play as “…what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons”.

The Children's Play programme is part of the Children's Play Initiative which is an investment of £155 million in play, with a key aim of raising the profile of play. This budget is divided into £123 million for Children's Play, £16 million for Playful Ideas which is the innovation strand open to non-statutory organisations (with a max value of £250k per project) and £15 million for Play England.

The Children's Play Programme aims to

• create, improve and develop children and young people's free local play spaces and opportunities throughout England, according to need;
• promote the long-term strategic and sustainable provision for play as a free public service to children;
• ensure that local authorities work with other local stakeholders to develop children's play strategies and plans; and
• ensure that good, inclusive and accessible children’s play service and facilities are provided locally.

The programme has a key focus on the most deprived areas and emphasises partnership working between local authorities and stakeholders to develop children's play strategies. The programme provides funding for portfolios of strategic projects delivered at a number of locations which form a cohesive strategy to achieving programme outcomes.
Big Lottery Fund will fund local authorities to deliver portfolios that support three or more of the following outcomes:

- More children will take part in a wider range of good, inclusive and accessible play experiences
- Children will have more choice and control over their play
- Children will develop greater well-being through play (including healthy growth, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn)
- Children will achieve greater independence and self-esteem through play
- Children will be able to test boundaries, be challenged and take risks through play, while kept safe from harm
- More children experiencing barriers to free play will be included in the mainstream play provision (for example, girls, children and young people from ethnic or religious minorities, children in care, children of refugees and homeless families and those living in rural areas)
- Local communities, especially children will have greater involvement in designing, planning and running play projects.

1.2 Aims of the evaluation

The overall aim of this evaluation is to assess the impact of the Children's Play programme. The programme will provide a wide range of inclusive and accessible play opportunities on children's play and the evaluation will examine the difference that greater choice and control over play can have for children. The evaluation will address a series of objectives as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Objectives of the evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives of the evaluation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent have children from hard to reach groups been able to access a wide range of play experiences and what approaches did projects use to target them?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How is ‘free play’ interpreted by projects and what does it look like in practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How have projects identified and addressed barriers to ‘free play’ in order to reduce disadvantage and exclusion for children in staffed and un-staffed play provision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are ‘good’ play experiences, as defined by children, families and communities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Has there been any noticeable difference around groups of children increasing their use of a range of play options i.e. more boys than girls, different age groups, covering different demographic backgrounds?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. To what extent do children have choice over their own play activities?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Objectives of the evaluation

7. How have children been involved in the planning and design of play facilities and what methods of consultation have been used by projects?

8. How do children, families and communities define involvement and participation?

9. How far does provision go in meeting the seven objectives of play provision described in Best Play?

10. Do projects offer opportunities for children to challenge and extend themselves, whilst managing risk and safety?

1.3 Methodology

This is a three year evaluation that commenced in September 2008, and will complete in August 2011. The main methodologies and data sources are as follows:

- The development of an evaluation and sampling framework which informs the structure and development of the evaluation.
- A three stage desk review: at programme level to establish the baseline for the programme; at portfolio level to support the 16 case studies (described below); and an evaluation of self evaluations at portfolio level which will take place towards the end of the evaluation.
- A series of 20 portfolio level case studies, which includes snapshot visits to 16 local authority portfolios and repeat visits (over two separate sessions) to four portfolios, spread across the three years of the evaluation. Case studies are selected to reflect the cross section of regions, activities and target groups being funded through the programme. Each visit includes in-depth interviews with the portfolio manager/lead, with project managers within the portfolio and primary research with beneficiaries as well as observations. In particular a range of interactive methods have been developed to engage children and young people have been developed including an age appropriate research diary and disposable cameras and visioning exercises.
- Surveys will be conducted among local authority portfolio leads, project managers within portfolios; and a survey of beneficiaries.
1.4 Evaluation progress

This report is the interim report for year one of the evaluation. It presents the emerging findings to date, based on data collected up to the end of March 2009: this includes desk based research and four case study visits. The qualitative data collected via case studies should be considered illustrative but not necessarily statistically representative of the views of local authorities and other participants in the programme. The report also draws on a parallel evaluation of Play England activities being conducted by National Children's Bureau including a survey of local authorities to assess progress in delivering their play portfolios (Evaluation of Play England - Local Authority Survey Year Three, NCB, Internal Report, 2009) and early findings from the evaluation of the Play Pathfinder Programme being undertaken for DCSF. For more details on the methodology or any aspect of this report please contact Nicola Hall at ECOTEC Research & Consulting on nicola.hall@ecotec.com. All research tools have been previously provided to BIG and are available on request.

1.5 Structure of this report

This report is structured according to the evaluation objectives as follows:

- Chapter two contains an overview of the programme as a whole and describes the portfolios that have been funded, the activities they are planning and their progress with these;
- Chapter three contains an initial exploration of ‘free play’: how it is being interpreted and implemented by projects and how barriers to free play have been lifted;
- Chapter four presents the evidence collected so far on which groups have participated in play projects so far, including any evidence on hard to reach groups;
- Chapter five looks at how far children and families have engaged in play projects;
- Chapter six presents brief implications and next steps for the evaluation.

The annexes contain a description of the model of participation used in the evaluation framework (Annex One) and a summary of the seven objectives of best play as identified by Play England (Annex Two). Annex Three contains samples of the play diaries used during the evaluation.
2.0 Overview of the programme and early impacts

This section provides an overview of the programme to date in terms of the scale and scope of the portfolios that have been funded (Section 2.1). It then goes on to describe the progress made to date with the portfolios and some early emerging strategic impacts at portfolio level, based on feedback to National Children's Bureau and the early case study research (Section 2.2).

2.1 Overview of play programme

2.1.1 Size and value of the programme

BIG’s Children's Play Programme was designed to benefit all the local authorities in England. The amount of funding allocated to each local authority area depended on its child population and level of deprivation. Each local authority was sent an application pack and was responsible for coordinating their applications.

Across the five grant rounds\(^1\) 351 portfolios have been funded with a varying number of grants awarded at each round. The largest number of grants were awarded in December 2007 (201) and the smallest number of grants was awarded in August 2008 (13)\(^2\). Grants awarded have an average grant length of three years.

To date, just over £123 million has been distributed among the portfolios with an average of around £300,000 of funding per portfolio. The size of grants awarded varied considerably from the smallest grant being £100,000 to the largest grant of over £3 million. Portfolios tended to have a greater range in the size of revenue grants however on average larger grants were awarded for capital than revenue (see Table 2.1). Most of the grants awarded (302) tend to be a combination of capital and revenue with less than 50 portfolios being solely capital (29) or revenue (17) grants.

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\(^1\) The grant rounds took place in February 2007, June 2007, December 2007, April 2008 and August 2008

\(^2\) Grants awarded per round were as follows: February 2007 = 32 awards worth over £12.2 million, June 2007 = 88 awards worth over £33.9 million, December 2007 = 201 awards worth over £67.6 million, April 2008 = 17 awards worth over £5.6 million and August 2008 = 13 awards worth over £3.6 million.
### Table 2.1 Grant size of portfolios funded to date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grant size of portfolios funded to date</th>
<th>Lowest</th>
<th>Highest</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Grant size</td>
<td>£100,000</td>
<td>£3,017,236</td>
<td>£2,917,236</td>
<td>£329,112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue size</td>
<td>£0</td>
<td>£2,638,677</td>
<td>£2,638,677</td>
<td>£172,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital size</td>
<td>£0</td>
<td>£843,114</td>
<td>£843,114</td>
<td>£180,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ECOTEC from BIG data*

Each portfolio supports a series of projects (also known as third party projects). Over 1,400 projects have been awarded Children's Play programme grants across the 351 local authorities. The largest number of projects were awarded grants in December 2007 (811) and the smallest number of projects granted in April 2008.

Portfolios consist, on average, of four projects that are either delivered by the portfolio lead (i.e. the local authority itself) or a third party organisation (for example these are usually a voluntary sector delivery partner). The smallest portfolio has a single project whilst the largest consists of 29 projects. The size value of the projects also varies considerably as smaller projects were awarded just over £1,000 ranging to over £1 million for the largest projects.

#### 2.1.2 Outcomes

The programme outlined eight outcomes for portfolios. All portfolios are working towards at least three of the outcomes and many portfolios have multiple outcomes as different projects within the portfolio meet different outcomes. Table 2.2 below shows the spread, with 'more children taking part children taking part in a wider range of good play experiences' being the most popular outcome with over 90% of portfolios working towards it. 'More children experiencing barriers to free play be included in play provision' is also common (70%). The least common outcome was 'children acquiring greater social skills and respect for others through play' (28%).
Table 2.2 Portfolio outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>No. of portfolios (n)</th>
<th>Proportion of portfolios (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children achieving greater independence &amp; self esteem through play</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children acquiring greater social skills &amp; respect for others through play</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children being able to test boundaries while kept safe from harm</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children developing greater well being through play</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children having more choice and control over their play</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local communities having greater involvement in play projects</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More children experiencing barriers to free play be included in play provision</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More children taking part in a wider range of good play experiences</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ECOTEC from BIG data

2.1.3 Geographical spread

The programme is England wide with a portfolio awarded to 351 of the 354 English local authorities. The number of portfolios allocated in each region varies from 21 to 68 broadly in line with the size and number of the local authorities located in a region. The South East has the largest number of portfolios (19%) whilst Yorkshire and the Humber has the fewest (6%) (see Table 2.3).

A region with a large number of portfolios does not necessarily have a large total value of grants. For instance London, rather than the South East, was allocated the largest amount of grants. This finding is unsurprising due to the size of London and the number of children that reside there. The North East has the lowest value of portfolios. In addition London was awarded the largest average funds per portfolio. The East of England has lowest average value of funds per portfolio (see Table 2.3).
Table 2.3 No of portfolios, total funds and funds per portfolios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>No of portfolios</th>
<th>Total value</th>
<th>Av funds size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>£18,194,534</td>
<td>£551,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and the Humber</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>£11,788,607</td>
<td>£561,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>£16,075,534</td>
<td>£382,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>£16,447,361</td>
<td>£241,873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>£11,733,785</td>
<td>£239,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>£12,287,533</td>
<td>£372,349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>£10,837,141</td>
<td>£240,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>£9,902,540</td>
<td>£267,636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>£7,263,995</td>
<td>£315,826</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ECOTEC from BIG data

2.2 Progress with play portfolios

According to feedback collected by National Children's Bureau\(^1\) the majority of local authorities (90%) say they are on track with their delivery of their BIG funded play portfolio and 8% said they had completed all their planned projects or activities. Two in five said they had begun to deliver several projects or had completed one or more projects (41% ad 40% respectively). Feedback from the case studies conducted as part of this evaluation suggests that revenue projects have been faster to get off the ground, with capital projects taking longer to get started.

2.3 Challenges in implementing play portfolios

Local authorities suggested to National Children's Bureau\(^2\) that they had experienced several challenges in getting portfolios off the ground and much of this evidence was corroborated in case study visits. These challenges included:

- **Capacity issues** arising from difficulties in staff recruitment and retention. The National Children's Bureau research revealed that many portfolios did not yet have full staff in place as planned to deliver the activities or projects and have faced difficulties getting appropriately qualified staff in post. Case study research also

\(^1\) Evaluation of Play England - Local Authority Survey Year Three, NCB, Internal Report, 2009. Survey base = 163 local authorities

confirmed this: for example Solihull found some play workers were resistant to working ‘outside’ and found they had to make the outdoor nature of the role more explicit in recruitment advertisements.

- **Planning permission and legal issues** have also been a barrier to getting correct permissions to use land for play. This was also evidenced in case studies: for example Bradford reported having initial difficulties acquiring land titles and deeds to be able to proceed with play area development. Solihull reported that various departments within the authority had not effectively collaborated on coordinating the site and content for an adventure playground and as a result some of the structures that were built were not appropriate.

- **A lack of community involvement or support for play projects** as well as NIMBY attitudes (not in my back yard) were identified as barriers to developing projects successfully. Engagement is explored more fully in chapter five.

- **Other challenges such as poor weather, delays with building contractors and delays in receiving match funding** were all identified in the National Children’s Bureau survey.¹ Some local authorities also reported that they had found the monitoring requirements time consuming.

- The case studies also revealed some further challenges including **inadequate or ineffective delivery partners** leading to local authorities having to re-tender certain projects (for example in Norwich); issues around **safety for staff working alone** in more disadvantaged areas (this has meant that staff are encouraged to double up which therefore reduces the volume of support that can be provided at the same cost); and **vandalism** of play facilities.

¹ Evaluation of Play England - Local Authority Survey Year Three, NCB, Internal Report, 2009
2.4 Early impacts of play portfolios

There were several early impacts emerging from BIG funded play portfolios identified in the National Children's Bureau research and also highlighted through the case studies conducted for this evaluation, particularly around raising the profile of play, embedding play within the local wide authority policy structure and thinking about sustainability, as follows.

Figure 2.1 Emerging early impacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) Raising the profile of play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90% of local authorities reported that the BIG funded play programme had raised the profile of play (Source: National Children's Bureau, Internal Document, 2009) but it was not specified which audiences this referred to and whether these were within the local authority, or outside the local authority (e.g. among chief executives, councillors, stakeholders or communities, parents and children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69% of local authorities reported the BIG funding had improved local authorities attitudes towards play and improved inter-departmental working (70%). 64% said it had improved relations with the voluntary sector and 46% said it had improved relations with other agencies (for example local health trusts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The case studies also provided evidence of this. For example larger local authorities reported that their play partnerships were part of the wider children and young people’s strategic partnership (CYPSP) and reported to the CYPSP board. However smaller local authorities, like Solihull reported that they did not have a dedicated lead for play and staff have to take on play as an extra part of their remit or role in the local authority. Bradford noted that they had appointed a Play Champion for a three year term to champion play strategy; and who was appointed by a panel of young people. The Norwich portfolio works closely with the third sector and two of its three projects are delivered by third sector partners. Other portfolios were delivering more of their play in house.</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(2) Embedding and securing additional funding</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nearly half (48%) of portfolios said the funding had helped them secure extra funds for play, which included a range of funds from large scale national funds (e.g. Play pathfinders from DCSF or Healthy Towns from DH) through to smaller scale local funds and grants (e.g. from district or parish councils).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of local authorities had linked their play strategy (and thus their portfolio) to other parallel strategies, including open space audits (71%), children and young people’s plans (69%) and community strategies (63%) most commonly. More than a third linked their play strategy to local area agreements (38%). Very few linked their play strategy to transport (15%) – and this appeared to be a missed opportunity in ensuring access to new play services or facilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(3) Sustainability

Over half of local authorities felt the infrastructure for play in their area was sustainable (55% of which 6% reported ‘very sustainable’). However one in five did not feel it was sustainable in its current form (20%) and a quarter were unsure (26%). The National Children’s Bureau research and case study feedback from this evaluation indicated that portfolio leads felt a lot of the funded activity would not have taken place without BIG funding and that two things were needed to sustain play going forwards: high level commitment within the local authority and at all levels, for play; and longer term funding whether from core funds or from future pots of funding that could be applied for. Some of the case studies were committed to continuing all the portfolio activity after the life of the BIG funding; for example Norwich who planned to do this via a core and non core funding mix. Projects taking place in Norwich’s portfolio were actively seeking future partners to bid together with for future funding.

Source: ECOTEC from National Children’s Bureau data and ECOTEC case studies

Some early unexpected outcomes were also highlighted in the case studies around enhanced parental engagement via the play portfolios. For example in one of Bradford’s projects some parents had become so involved in the project that they had voluntarily trained to become play workers (via the local council’s own training scheme) and were intending to set up their own play scheme. In Solihull, project staff commented that having parents present was beneficial in that parents who were unsure how to play with their children were learning how to get involved with play.
3.0 Exploring free play

This section provides an explanation of how ‘free play’ has been defined and interpreted by portfolios in theory and practice (Section 3.1), and looks at what constitutes ‘good play’ for children. It considers the extent to which choice is provided for children within play portfolios and looks at what evidence there is so far about what if any barriers to play have been removed via the BIG funding (Section 3.2). Finally, it considers the emerging evidence around risk and safety in play portfolios (Section 3.3).

3.1 How is free play defined and interpreted by portfolios

The concept of ‘free play’ is integral to all of the portfolios studied so far at the theoretical and the planning level: the approach used is commonly based on the definition provided by BIG of the ‘three frees’ (free of charge; children free to come and go; children free to chose what they do). Some portfolios also adopt the ‘Best Play’ definition\(^1\) that states ‘play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child’. Essentially, play portfolios are based on providing play free of charge; that is not directed by adults so that children are free to choose their own activities; that is for its own sake for example not explicitly linked to learning outcomes; and that children are free to come and go and play on their own terms. Choice and control for children and young people are therefore central. Planning for the content of play portfolios followed this theoretical underpinning. For example in developing its 2008 play strategy, Bradford saw the need for more outdoor play facilities and more play facilities that were not determined by adults – and both these elements have been incorporated into the BIG funded portfolio.

However the concept of free play is viewed as ‘aspirational’ by portfolios. Implementing the definition in reality has not always been straightforward; there have been some issues and difficulties. For instance one portfolio lead noted that there are often caveats to the concept of free play, for instance not all play schemes within a local authority can be offered completely free of charge. This may cause tensions between BIG funded and non BIG funded activities. Also, it was noted that when play facilities are designed to be open and free to access for all, not everyone can benefit from them equally; for instance children with disabilities may require additional help or support to access free or open play facilities and such an unstructured format may actually exclude them from fully participating.

“To my mind free play is to enable a child who may be desperate to get involved in something but can’t, not because they’re shy but because they physically cannot get there. So I think that’s our raison d’etre that’s why we do” (Play project worker, Norwich)

To overcome this, play is therefore provided to disabled children so they are free to chose what they do, but are assisted to do so by staff. The definition of ‘three frees’ was not always viewed as helpful by portfolios; with some feeling it may have limited the scope of some projects having been implemented too rigidly, and that it should be used more loosely, as guidance.

Some local authorities felt they had a large task in communicating and embedding the concept of free play to stakeholders, councillors, teachers and other staff within the local authority; to non play staff; and to parents, in order to ensure all audiences were fully on board with the concept (for example Bradford and Solihull). One portfolio identified reluctance among all these audiences to embrace the concept of free play particularly as it entailed unstructured play areas and children being able to come and go, which was sometimes felt to be unsafe (also see below on risks). Some authorities saw this as a ‘culture shock’ since many had a very risk-averse approach to child related provision and traditionally preferred to hand children from one supervisory adult to another. Some authorities felt this ‘free’ approach may leave them open to legal action from parents. Similarly some parents felt this unstructured approach may mean their children were not being properly cared for. There was therefore a difficult and ongoing process of communicating the benefits of free play and building trust in the process.

3.2 How is free play happening in practice?

In practice, the delivery of free play has in the case studies so far, been delivered in a range of ways, including:

- Giving children a wider choice of play areas, including developing or building new play areas
- Taking existing play facilities to new areas (e.g. via mobile play facilities to expand reach to rural areas)
- Providing more ‘outdoor’ and ‘natural’ play areas (for example adventure playgrounds and natural materials)
Giving children a wider range of play materials and objects, and encouraging children to play in new ways with existing objects/materials (for example new ways of playing with toys)

Opening up specialist play to all children, for example enabling children who do not have a disability (mainstream provision) to benefit from sensory play or activities usually reserved for disabled children

Enabling play that children cannot access elsewhere (e.g. messy play)

Enabling open ended play – where children and young people select the activity or set the agenda, and workers support it (e.g. crafts, sports, karaoke, role play)

Enabling more risk taking or adventurous play (see below section).

Some examples of free play, evidenced in the case studies visited to date are given below.

**Case study: Defining free play, Bradford portfolio**

Bradford’s play strategy defines free play as:

"**those pursuits that actively engage children and young people as thinkers and doers, and that are freely chosen by children and young people, undertaken simply for the intrinsic satisfaction of doing them, and at all times under their own control. Free play is what children and young people do, when they are doing what they choose, in their own way, for their own reasons, and when there is no success or failure except what they decide.**"\(^1\)

The strategy quotes a child who defined play when they were consulted on the strategy. They said "Play is what I do, when everyone has stopped telling me what to do".

In practice, play at both the projects visited for the case study is child-led, though the two projects do take different approaches. The Mobile Playscheme makes provision for a number of activities on site, though the children are entirely free to move between them and engage in which ever ones they want to. Observations conducted at the visit illustrated activities including indoor cricket, a bouncy castle, an arts and crafts room, a messy play area and a quiet area where children could play board games or just sit and chat. The scheme is free access and is provided on a drop in basis, so children can come and go as they please. Bradford have found that the concept of free play does differ

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\(^1\) All To Play For - a strategy for children’s play in Bradford District: [http://www.bradford.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/1CA77CB3-F31A-42D6-87CB-BACC0D2B88EB/0/All_To_Play_For.pdf](http://www.bradford.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/1CA77CB3-F31A-42D6-87CB-BACC0D2B88EB/0/All_To_Play_For.pdf)
depending on location – the sessions they hold in parks over the summer are more free than those held indoors, which are inevitably going to be more formal.

At Eccleshill Adventure Playground, play is entirely led by the children who decide how the space is used and what they want to do – be it building a tree house or den, playing tennis or football, or drawing a picture. The activities aren't mutually exclusive and often all will be happening at the same time in different areas of the playground. The only fixed structure is the big swing – the rest of the climbing frames and tree houses are flexible and adaptable and quite often become entirely different structures over time.

Case study: Defining free play, Haringey portfolio

Haringey runs the ‘Somewhere to go, Something to do’ project for young girls aged 11-16 who are not catered for in traditional play provision and too young for youth provision. Girls visiting the once a week sessions are free to come and go as they like.

This project allows the young girls to set the agenda, and organise and define the activities. The project workers were unsure what form of play girls ages 11 or 12 upwards would prefer to participate in, and have found that the girls like some form of structure or plan of what they will be doing each session. In practice they now define free play as:

"[Free play is] being able to choose the activities and make available what they want to do within our financial constraints and provide staff who are multi skilled… making the space for young people to do what they feel they want to do. Sometimes you feel like its organised play or structured play. But it’s what the young people are asking for in terms of what they want to do, but it’s giving them the chance to explore new avenues and activities."

Implementing free play in practice has led to some interesting outcomes. For example Solihull reported that an open access detached play scheme they ran in summer 2008 led to some negotiation around the limits as to how free play could actually be. Play workers found that by allowing children completely free play children took more control and ownership but were therefore more difficult to control and got out of hand – play workers therefore found it challenging to put the free play concept into practise.
3.3 What barriers have been removed to free play?

The case studies have revealed some limited evidence so far about how barriers to play have been removed. For instance, by their very design, many portfolios include mobile play facilities which have removed geographical or transport related barriers to accessing play by bringing play to a wider variety of locations within the area than was previously possible. For example the Norwich portfolio has provided funding to a mobile toy library to enable it to extend its service delivery to a wider range of localities including more remote and isolated rural areas and more deprived areas. Individual projects have also removed barriers for children with disabilities, for example the funding has allowed disabled children to access mainstream provision by providing greater input from project workers to support this. A play project in Haringey has had some interesting outcomes around breaking down social barriers between young people in the community through play, as described below.

Case study: Breaking down barriers to play, Haringey

Postcode barriers
The ‘Somewhere to go’ project tried to encourage girls from various parts of the borough to attend the girls club. Girls from a mix of cultural and religious backgrounds attend the group, partly because parents with certain religious views or cultural backgrounds e.g. Muslims, Christians and the travelling community are keen on their daughters attending girls only groups. Girls started attending the club while it was located in a cottage on school grounds and then had to move to a class room for more space. In the borough there were ‘postcode wars’ and young people were scared of going into another area of Haringey wearing their school uniform. Some of the girls from the original club are now attending the club now it has relocated and the project is trying to break down these types of barriers through play. The hope is that the girls from different postcodes form a bond which will overspill to outside the club and encourage other girls to make friends from outside their own school. The relationships built up in holiday periods between the girls would then transfer to during school term times.

Transport barriers
One issue that arose for the girls club in the Autumn 2008 term was that the dark evenings made it difficult for girls to attend seeing as the club is ‘free for girls to come and go’. For example girls would want to go home but it was dark and the site was quite a walk from the main road and the bus stop. This meant one worker would walk girls to the bus stop which would leave one worker at the club. In the end the team decided it was necessary to have three staff to overcome this.

This aspect will be explored further in the rest of the research.
3.4 **What is good play for children?**

The case studies collected feedback from children and families about what constituted good play experiences for children and young people and how new provision compared with what was available previously. So far the feedback from users of the various BIG funded play activities has been very positive. Comments have identified:

- That there was a lack of activities or facilities beforehand and that availability was highly variable between local areas (for example the perception in London that some boroughs provided much more than others e.g. Camden versus Haringey)
- That young people would hang out at bus stops or outside shops as there was nowhere else to go
- That adults would not allow children to play ball games or play noisily on existing play areas
- That what existed before was poor quality, run down or vandalised or that expensive equipment (e.g. a Wii) would be broken or stolen
- That what did exist was not very well advertised or publicised and therefore not known about by its target audiences
- That previous provision had not been designed with young people’s needs or preferences in mind and that children and young people had never been properly consulted.

"The parks aren’t very good some of them. They will always refurbish them and then after a while they get mashed up again so there’s no point going.”

“I just felt that they tell us what we need, when they don’t really know what we need. They just really judging us on what they see.” (Girls, aged 11-16, Haringey)

In contrast, feedback on BIG funded play activity was generally positive. Children and young people liked the opportunity to have self directed play and have control over what activities they undertook. For younger children they liked the opportunity to access play or use equipment they could not experience at home, for example messy play with shave foam and clay or sensory equipment. For older children the opportunity to socialise with friends was seen as beneficial and they recognised that the model of ‘free play’ being used was a “different approach” from what they had encountered previously. For girls there were benefits of being in a girls only group which gave them the confidence to participate fully which they may not have felt able to do in mixed provision (Haringey). Parents interviewed could also see the value of giving children new experiences.
Some young people did express very high expectations about what would constitute ‘good play’ including for example trips to the theatre or holidays and a common theme was that project workers found they often had to manage expectations about what might be possible on tight budgets.

3.5 Managing risk and safety

Previous research suggests that safety measures and standards are often put before children’s interests and development when designing and delivering play\(^1\). Evidence so far suggests that risk is built into some play strategies, for example Norwich’s play strategy aims to offer all children the opportunity to encounter acceptable risks in stimulating and challenging play environments. Portfolios funded by BIG are trying to take the opportunity within the definition of ‘free play’ to extend play facilities to include a greater sense of risk taking within a safe environment. Traditionally some local authorities had been very conservative with regard to risk-taking play and portfolio leads say they have had to ‘push the boundaries’ about how risk-taking or adventurous play can safely be combined in the play portfolio.

The Eccleshill project within Bradford portfolio is a good example of providing opportunities to test and manage risk where children are given free reign to build their own adventure play area using packing crates and wood off-cuts, dig holes or build fires.

**Case study: Managing risk and safety, The Big Swing, Bradford**

The Eccleshill Adventure Playground (Big Swing) is one of the 15 projects which make up the play portfolio in Bradford. It is managed by Eccleshill Adventure Playground; an organisation whose management committee includes representatives from a range of local statutory organisations including the Local Authority and the PCT.

The playground is situated in an area which has long been identified as an area of play deprivation. Occupying Council-owned land, the playground is located at the heart of one of Bradford's largest social housing estates. The site was previously used as a gardening facility for adults with learning difficulties; however when that project ended the space was used extensively by local children, prompting it's rebirth as a designated play area.

The playground is known as The Big Swing because of the only fixed structure on the site – a huge rope swing. This is surrounded by an aerial slide and a number of climbing frames, tree houses, dens, tunnels and other structures which have been constructed by

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\(^1\) Dr S Rogers, Dr C Pelletier, A Clark (March 2009) Play and outcomes for children and young people: literature review to inform the national evaluation of play pathfinders and play builders, DCSF.
the children (with the support of the on-site handy-man) using mainly donated materials. On site there is also a fire pit surrounded by seating, which provides a natural space for children to gather and talk, and space to play football or other games. The children also have access to arts and crafts materials.

Play here is entirely child-led and free; the children decide how they want to use their space and what they do within it. The space is used flexibly by the children and they can transform it any way they choose. Children can use raw materials (like packing crates) to build their own structures. During our visit, two boys were transforming a step down from a path into a pond with the use of some breeze blocks and discarded drain pipes, while another worked with the handy-man to finish putting a roof on a den. Meanwhile, another girl played tennis with one of the play workers while some drew pictures and others cooked bread dough on sticks in the fire pit.

Children attending the playground are encouraged to establish their own boundaries and take risks but in a supervised and supported environment. Project staff help them build structures and test them for safety. Take up so far has been extremely good, with up to 60 children attending sessions in the school holidays, but the project manager sees the soft outcomes of the project to be one of their biggest achievements. Staff are seeing huge increases in confidence amongst the children, and they have found that children who attend regularly have been able to establish a different type of relationship with adults through interacting with play workers, who are not the authority figures they normally encounter in parents or teachers.

The project has received £140,000 in BIG funding for revenue activity. Staff are already looking for avenues to secure future funding to allow the project to continue.

There have however been some barriers to overcome to allow this type of risk taking play to take place – particularly around local attitudes. In Bradford, parents and the wider community were initially dubious about the safety aspects of the project and the project has had to work hard to engage the local community to communicate and reassure them (e.g. via coffee mornings or open days). In addition the attitude and behaviour of some children and young people has been challenging and vandalism has occurred making things difficult for the site in the early stages. The project team say they plan to engage more closely with youth services in the areas to address the issues around older children disrupting the play area. Finally, in another adventure park in Solihull, the fixed structures in the park have lost their challenge and creativity for children, who have become used to them and do not find them exciting or stimulating any more. This illustrates how provision needs to be flexible to constantly enable children to challenge and extend themselves. In Solihull the park is being redesigned with new structures to facilitate this.
4.0  Reaching hard to reach groups through play

This chapter looks at whether hard to reach groups been reached via the programme, how were they reached and what approaches were used? The chapter looks at emerging evidence around what groups and types of children are playing via the programme.

4.1 Reaching hard to reach groups

Portfolios are targeting their activities at around 17 target groups with many portfolios aiming their provision at more than one of these groups. Most commonly, portfolios are providing provision which is open for all, with a target group of 'all children' (69% suggesting that under a third were planning to offer more specific provision). This refers to portfolios catering for all children in the authority either via inclusive provision or by having several projects targeting different groups of children across the area. Other common target groups were 'children with disability or additional needs' (42%), 'children living in rural areas' (36%) and 'children living in deprived areas' (35%). All of these groups of children faced an obvious barrier, either geographical or physical, which limited their access to play. Some of the other target groups were very specific groups and only targeted by a small number of local authorities which may be due to a particular need that the play strategy identified in that area.

Table 4.1 Portfolio level target groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target groups</th>
<th>No. of portfolios targeting</th>
<th>Proportion of portfolios targeting (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All children</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children with disability/additional needs</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children living in rural areas</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children living in deprived areas</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older children (includes teen parents)</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children living in area with little/no provision</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BME groups</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated children</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger children (including toddlers)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gypsy and traveller groups</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable groups</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children with family problems/domestic violence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child carers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in urban areas</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looked after children</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ECOTEC from BIG data

Targeting specific groups was based on play strategies which identified particular needs at the local level. For example Norwich’s play strategy identified disadvantaged groups as a priority; and Haringey’s strategy targeted children with disabilities and these translated directly into projects within the portfolio. Other play strategies were less specific, for example Solihull’s strategy outlined that quality play opportunities are viewed as a right for all children in the borough. This may be because Solihull is a smaller borough and needed to focus effort on raising the profile of play in the borough.

4.1.1 Take up

Evidence from the National Children's Bureau survey of local authorities participating in the programme indicated that the majority feel they have increased the number of children and young people accessing play opportunities (82%); suggesting that the majority of portfolios are meeting the most common outcome around ‘More children taking part in a wider range of good play experiences’. A further three quarters feel they have increased the number of free open access play opportunities (76%) suggesting that ‘free play’ is being delivered via the portfolios.¹

Qualitative feedback from the case studies also supports this. There is evidence that with BIG funding, portfolios are delivering more play than they did previously and delivering new play opportunities that were not available before. For example in Norwich one project previously could only deliver one play session a week but this has now risen to three sessions a week, and there has been excellent demand and take up of the service. Similarly, the toy library bus in Norwich identified a gap in services where it could not do enough visits due to time constraints. The BIG funding has allowed the toy bus to do more visits and target isolated and deprived areas that it could not reach before. Bradford indicated it had been able to double its capacity in some areas using BIG funding. There is also considerable evidence of BIG funding supporting new activities, such as facilities

that did not exist before (e.g. natural and outdoor play areas) or providing new equipment or activities such as sensory play.

4.1.2 Reaching disadvantaged groups

Feedback from the case studies displays very positive outcomes particularly around engaging disadvantaged groups, for example children in rural areas and deprived communities. For example:

- Norwich portfolio is running sessions at a mother and toddler group in a deprived area of Norwich with very limited resources. Currently 20-40 children a week access these sessions. During the year ending February 2009 the Norwich portfolio delivered play sessions to 1,164 children of which 182 had special needs (16%).

- Take up in Bradford has been extremely high and project staff have found it hard to meet the demand. Parts of the portfolio target rural areas, and last summer 2,000 children from rural areas were engaged in play sessions (achieving the target).

However there are some challenges where further work is required, as the below examples highlight.

Case study: Reaching new groups through play, Bradford portfolio

Bradford’s portfolio as a whole has a target for 55,000 children and young people to benefit from improved play provision across the district by the end of Year 2, to include:

- Better play provision for disabled children by encouraging 500 disabled and more able children to play together by the end of Year 2
- Better play provision for 10,000 children in rural parts of the district by the end of Year two.
- Increased involvement of 300 children and young people in the development of local play provision through their engagement in all related decision making processes throughout the implementation phase of the portfolio and its projects.
- More to do and more to play with throughout the district by the end of year 2 through the provision of a minimum of 20 new fixed play areas and 40 other mobile play spaces.

These targets are reflected in the individual targets of the projects visited during the case study. Take up at both the facilities has been good so far and both projects have already
exceeded their targets for the year. The projects have demonstrated that there is a need for play facilities in the areas they operate.

The target groups being reached by the Playscheme vary depending on the individual location. However, there are patterns: the gender balance is usually fairly even and the age of attendees tends to be between 8 and 11. Sometimes older children do attend – 15-16 year olds less commonly attend. The project’s key target groups / priorities were rural areas and children with disabilities: they have exceeded their rural targets but have struggled to reach children with disabilities. They feel there is possibly some reluctance amongst parents of disabled children to bring their children to mainstream schemes. Of the target 200 disabled children, around 70 have attended this year.

The Big Swing project has experienced similar difficulties with children with disabilities, though there are some notable exceptions. On the whole, at the Big Swing take up is good – the project is open most weekdays and every weekend and in the summer there can be as many as 60 children in attendance. Children attending are generally aged between 8 and 13, though older ones do sometimes come along. However, they can be very disruptive; they don’t really grasp the context of the playground. The team are working with local secondary schools and teams within the Council to try and improve the offer for older children. Generally, the children attending live on the estate in which the playground is situated, though there is some work being done to engage those who live in the wider surrounding area.

Case study: Reaching new groups through play, Norwich

Disabled children
Norwich has had some difficulties in attracting disabled children to access BIG funded play. While play areas are DDA compliant (disability discrimination act) they are not well used by disabled children because they need supervision which is not always available. The portfolio is looking at using alternative funding to enable them to deliver supervised play to complement the BIG funded activity and make facilities more accessible to all. Bradford has also found that parents of disabled children do not always like to let their children access mainstream play or open play facilities. Bradford are considering doing further partnership work in future to bring in partner organisations to help engage with these families to solve these issues.

Traveller communities
Several of the portfolios have experienced difficulties reaching traveller communities. Some of the barriers have included difficulties making contact with the travellers or finding
a suitable ‘way in’; difficulties in building trust with the community; and others have encountered some wariness of ‘free’ provision. Some portfolios are working with liaison staff within their local authority to work out how to best access these groups.

4.2 Methods for reaching hard to reach groups

Projects evaluated so far have used a range of largely predictable methods to reach their target groups. These have included: local press, newsletters, posters, leaflets in schools, surgeries etc and mail shots. Word of mouth is also relied upon and spreading the word via extended schools or detached youth workers. Some portfolios have tried alternative approaches including Bradford which offered play taster sessions at local schools to give children the chance to try out what was on offer. Largely however the evidence suggests that demand for the services exists and children are being reached in large numbers. None of the portfolios reported difficulties in accessing target audiences. It was only in reaching specific communities that a more targeted approach was required (for example through partner working with local groups or liaison teams as detailed above).
5.0 Engaging children and families in play

This chapter looks at the extent to which children and families been involved in planning and designing the play portfolios or projects and explores what consultation methods have been used and been effective.

5.1 Scope and scale of engagement activity

Qualitative feedback from case studies indicates that portfolios are or have engaged, at one level or another, broadly in three areas:

- When developing their play strategy – many local authorities engaged in some way with children and families at the time of developing or updating their play strategy. *(For example Bradford consulted 1,000 children and young people including a particular focus on children of asylum seekers, children in temporary accommodation and those at risk of offending. The consultation asked them about their issues and priorities around play).*

- On the design of individual facilities – for example some portfolios engaged local children and young people about what they would like to see included in a specific play facility once BIG funding for it had been assured. *(For example Norwich undertook consultation on how local children would like the Eco park to be designed, they will then take this design to the local community to get their views).*

- Feedback on the play facility they have accessed – for example through happy sheets or surveys which help staff to adapt play sessions as they go along based on feedback.

5.2 Mechanisms for engaging

The portfolios have used a wide range of techniques for engaging beneficiaries, including: surveys and questionnaires, forums and focus groups, events and public meetings, video diaries, graffiti walls and post it notes. Portfolios have generally recognised the value of mixed methods of consultation to ensure people can participate in a way that they prefer. Some examples are below.
Case study: Engaging beneficiaries, Bradford portfolio

The Bradford portfolio has developed a toolkit of ways to involve people effectively in play.

Bradford’s Mobile Playscheme team have worked hard to engage beneficiaries in the design of their project, and this work is ongoing. The scheme offer free play sessions at local schools during term time, and these sessions are used to informally consult the children from the area as to what they would like to see in a scheme. Feedback is also gathered throughout the delivery of the project – graffiti walls are often used, as are post-its and comment boards. They have also used video diaries and cameras with the children to allow them to feed into the project design and delivery. The consultation work done by the team has been much more extensive than they expected and they feel it couldn't have happened without the BIG funding.

At Bradford’s Big Swing project, the activities are completely centred on what the children want from the space, and as such, they are key to the design of the project. However, the children are also more formally involved in consultation through the use of diaries and photography, and the fire pit on site provides a natural space for the children to sit and talk to the play workers about what they want. Some work has also been done to engage parents and the local community, by means of open days and coffee mornings. This approach has done a lot to break down some initial reservations which were held by those living near the playground.

Generally, the levels of engagement generally adopted by portfolios fall under the first three rungs of Wilcox’s model of involvement (see Annex One): informing, consulting and deciding together.

- **Informing** – some activity has been focussed on telling local people what is available (advertising facilities) and work to improve community relations once a facility is open (for example to invite local people in, to have a look round) with the aim of ‘getting people on board’

- **Consulting** – some activity has been around consulting, so asking people what they would like or what their priorities are (particularly when designing play strategies)

- **Deciding together** – there is also some limited evidence of occasions where children and young people are joint decision makers in a process (for example in deciding the content or structure of a play facility or in electing members of staff).
Examples of the upper rungs of the ladder (such as acting together to run a project or the most enhanced model where the local community is supported to fund and run its own activity) are not yet evident, though that is not to say they are not occurring and future research will seek to identify examples.

5.3 Benefits and challenges of engaging

A number of benefits of engaging with children and parents were noted in the case studies. Strategically, local authorities were able to fund more engagement activity using BIG funding which they had not previously been able to do. They felt this led to better, more appropriate and more demand-led (bottom-up) provision as a result. Children who had been involved in designing future play provision had enjoyed the process (for example one group from Solihull had visited a play area in Wolverhampton to get ideas) but until the provision they had commented upon was built they could not comment on what impact the engagement activity had had on them.

Portfolios have encountered some challenges in engaging effectively. For example in feedback to National Children’s Bureau\(^1\) local authorities noted difficulties engaging local communities encountering NIMBY attitudes (not in my back yard) particularly when it came to developing or getting permission for new, more open play areas. Residents were particularly concerned about anti social behaviour. It was also reported that local residents lacked the will or capacity to take ownership of new provision. This was encountered in the case studies too; Bradford’s Big Swing project was unpopular at first but as local residents have begun to recognise its value and trust has begun to build up locally.

This area will be explored more as the evaluation develops.

\(^1\) Evaluation of Play England - Local Authority Survey Year Three, NCB, Internal Report, 2009. Survey base = 163 local authorities
6.0 **Implications and next steps**

The evaluation evidence available to date illustrates that BIG’s Children’s Play programme is supporting a concept of ‘free play’ which is generally welcomed by children and young people in supporting them to try new things and be creative. Definitions of free play generally incorporate the ‘three frees’ and support children to undertake self directed play for its own sake. The programme is allowing more children to access more play than they had been able to access before and to access new forms of play (e.g. sensory play, natural or adventurous play) than were previously available.

Generally projects are supporting children to have choice over their play – around choosing the format or content of a play area or by choosing the activities once they get there. The programme is also, in some cases, helping disadvantaged children such as those living in isolated areas where services cannot usually be delivered, or those with disabilities, to access play. There have been difficulties around engaging effectively with all target groups and work is still to be done to reach some communities, for example traveller communities. So far there is limited evidence of any really innovative means of engaging with children and young people, however portfolios have been strong on ensuring an inclusive nature and using multi methods to engage and recognise that BIG funding has enabled them the capacity to do so.

The portfolios are often aiming to provide children with opportunities to take risks and challenge themselves, but this often has to be negotiated within the local authorities themselves and with local communities. Issues have included getting and maintaining top level support for play as a whole, and also support for the ‘new’ concept of ‘free play’ which incorporates higher levels of risk than are usually acceptable.

Sustainability was a key issue for play. Going forwards only around half of portfolios felt their facilities were sustainable, and many felt that ongoing top level support and dedicated staff were necessary to ensure this. For example in smaller portfolios, staff have taken on play alongside other aspects of their remit which makes it difficult to sustain the work beyond the life of funding. Promisingly, play partnerships in many cases seemed to be embedded within wider council structures such as children’s strategic partnerships and linked to relevant strategies.
6.1 Implications and next steps

The next steps for the evaluation will be centred on capitalising upon data already collected and ensuring future data collection is appropriate.

A key step will be to identify and agree the remainder of the case studies, with a view to conducting further case study visits over coming months. Visits will be weighted towards the latter years of the evaluation in order to allow time for projects to come to fruition, in particular capital projects but timed to coincide with periods of activity such as school holiday times. The evaluation has revealed that 8% of portfolios report having completed all their activities and it might be beneficial to identify those portfolios from National Children's Bureau data and from BIG data to assess whether any might be included in the sample. Initial interviews with portfolio managers can then be conducted with all of the sample of case study portfolios to collect baseline information.

The precise focus for the surveys of portfolio leads, project managers and beneficiaries will be decided. While the National Children's Bureau survey at local authority level provided some detail of relevance to this study, there is a need for further data collection specific to the research objectives of this study, for example around consultation and engagement methods; effective approaches to reaching target groups; and changes in use of play (e.g. are more boys or girls accessing facilities?). A survey of project leads might best be administrated through portfolio leads (probably postally) and could collect more hands-on information about the range of target groups of children accessing play and what free play looks like in practice. Any survey of beneficiaries (i.e. children and young people) should be open ended and freely completed in line with the ethos of the programme, and we recommend a semi structured approach with free text spaces for children to record their thoughts. All such surveys should be designed to ensure they do not duplicate feedback already being collected by projects and to be age appropriate to the children being engaged.

A further exploration of ongoing programme monitoring data will be beneficial to explore what information is collected by BIG in relation to any of the research objectives, for instance around which groups have been reached via the programme (and in what amounts). This may enable us to build up a more robust picture of how many children have been engaged in play at the programme level. Similarly it will be worthwhile establishing when portfolio evaluation reports will be received; whether this process is formalised through BIG and how the evaluators might gain access to those.

A more strategic analysis of how the programme fits with seven objectives of Best Play (to link to objective 9 in Figure 1.1 page 2) will be done later on in the evaluation. This will
enable the presentation of information captured on outcomes for children from play. For example early case study evidence has identified outcomes around self confidence and personal development for children with autism. Though not explicitly one of the research objectives for this evaluation, it is likely that more data will be collected on outcomes that may contribute to the wider understanding and evidence base in this area. This type of information could be presented within the context of the Best Play objectives (see Annex Two).

It will also be important to consider dissemination of the early findings to share any early learning. For example the evaluation team in collaboration with BIG might consider circulating a short summary of key findings or a newsletter.
Annex One: Model of participation
Wilcox Model of Participation

Care is needed in evaluating community engagement, as the terms ‘consultation’ ‘engagement’, ‘participation’ and ‘involvement’ are often used to cover the same terrain. In the specification for this evaluation all these terms are used. For the purposes of this evaluation, engagement will be used as the key phrase. Some of the models of ‘engagement’ available use different terminology, but the categories used are relevant, nevertheless, to this study.

Wilcox prepared a model of engagement in 1995 which is simple and helpful. The model is presented as a ladder; however it isn’t the case that the higher level is what should be aimed at all the time, as each rung has its usefulness and relevance in specific circumstances. Different elements of participation can achieve different objectives so long as tokenism is avoided and it is clear what communities are being asked to become engaged with so they can make a decision as to whether they want to engage under those conditions or not.

This model of participation offers five levels - or stances - which offer increasing degrees of control to the others involved. It is a useful model for assessing involvement in community based projects.
# Wilcox Model of Participation (Wilcox, 1995)

*Five levels - or stances - which offer increasing degrees of control to the others involved.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell people what is planned.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offer a number of options and listen to the feedback you get.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deciding together</th>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage others to provide some additional ideas and options, and join in deciding the best way forward.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acting together</th>
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<tr>
<td>Not only do different interests decide together what is best, but they form a partnership to carry it out.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Supporting independent community initiative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helping others do what they want - perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the resource holder.</td>
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</table>

*Source: Wilcox D; 1995; Guide to Effective Participation; York: Rowntree*
Annex Two: Objectives of Best Play
Seven objectives of Best Play

Below the seven objectives of best play are identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Seven 'Best Play' Objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The provision recognises the child's need to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The provision manages the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 4</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The provision fosters children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The provision fosters the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: National Playing Fields Association (2000) in conjunction with PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council. The work was funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Available at www.playengland.org.uk)
Annex Three: Examples of play research diaries
Examples of play research diaries

Research diary ages 7-11 years

About this diary
This diary is for you to write about playing in the area where you live.
Over the page, there are spaces for you to write, draw, and to stick any photographs that you take. You can ask a grown-up to help if you like.
About this diary

This diary is for you to comment on where you go and what you do in your free time.

The diary has spaces for you to write about your area as well as include drawings or photographs.

There is no right or wrong way to use the diary. You can write as much or as little as you like. We are interested in your thoughts and feelings about what there is to do in your free time in your local area.

Please bring your finished diary with you when we next meet.