



A Landscape for Play: Natural Play Area Consultation Report



"If what best feeds children's bodies, minds and spirits is frequent, free-spirited, playful engagement with nature, we need to go with the grain of their play instincts and put our efforts into creating neighbourhood spaces where they can get down and dirty in natural outdoor settings, free of charge and on a daily basis."

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The Landscape for Play

In 2008 Bradford Metropolitan District Council's Parks and Landscapes Dept commissioned Artworks to undertake a full and meaningful consultation process with children, young people and the wider community to inform the design of a stimulating and sustainable landscape for play in Holmewood.

Proposal

Artworks is a participatory arts organisation with over 12 years' experience of using creative techniques to engage children and young people. For this project we proposed to use a creative and participatory approach to deliver a five stage programme which involved children and young people in the entire process of creating the new landscape, from consultation through development to design, installation and evaluation. We proposed that to make the consultation meaningful and inclusive, including at least four groups representing a cross section of the local children, young people and adults who will use the area, including pre-school children, primary and secondary school age children, disabled children and young people and groups who have a special interest in the area e.g. cyclists, horse riders, elderly residents etc.

Consultation

The consultation stage would focus on discovering how children and young people like (or would like) to play.

We proposed to use a diverse range of art forms to encourage the children and young people to think laterally and express themselves about playing in the outdoor environment. For example

- **Playing Out:** Using collaging and story telling techniques to enable younger children to share good play experiences e.g a day at the beach, a woodland game, a treasure hunt
- **Role Play;** Using drama games and props to create environments such as castles and dens
- **Imaginative Play:** Using creative techniques to describe a fantasy adventure with family or friends
- **Parkour:** Working with Parkour (or Urban Freeflow) practitioners to enable older children to respond to the existing landscape; jumping, rolling, climbing

Development

Using the material from the first creative sessions the next stage would be to develop these requirements into specific ideas. Again, Artworks proposed to use a creative participatory approach. For example;



- Mind Mapping; mapping out the existing landscape from the point of view of the children and young people through photographs, drawing, scrapbooks and 3D models
- Visioning; using the mind maps and similar 2D and 3D techniques to propose alterations to the landscape
- Materials; exploration of natural and manmade materials e.g. sculpture making and den building

Design and Installation Stages

Parks and Landscapes technical team would undertake the design and installation. Artworks proposed that the children and young people could remain involved in the programme e.g. through;

- A children and young people's steering group. Representatives should be able to attend planning and design meetings, be involved in appropriate decision-making and feedback progress to their peers.
- Documentation. Representatives from the various groups should be encouraged to document the project using photographs, drawing and writing from the consultation stage through to the design and installation. Documentation could be displayed in their centres to keep peers informed of the progress.
- Hands-on involvement in installation e.g. driving diggers, planting, laying paths or building walls.

Following the installation Artworks proposed to deliver a series of events to celebrate the launch of the new landscape and encourage children, young people and adults to use the new space.

Evaluation

The evaluation process would begin with the consultation and flow through the programme, with specific evaluation events programmed for after the completion of the new landscape to assess how the space is being used. Like the consultation, the evaluation process would use a creative and participatory approach to engage children and young people and capture a broad range of responses to the new landscape.





Why is Play Important?

“Play is essential to the healthy development of children and young people – not just their physical development, but their social and cognitive development too” (Design for Play, Play England, 2008)

“Children Play in many different ways according to their own interests and abilities, and enjoy different forms of play at different times and places. Approximately 15 different types have been identified, all of which are of importance to children’s enjoyment and day-to-day experience.” (Children’s Play Council, National Playing Fields association and Playlink, 2000)

“The challenge for play providers is to provide the best possible play opportunities, and to create play spaces which will attract children, capture their imagination and give them scope to play in new, more exciting, and more creative ways” (Design for Play, Play England, 2008)

According to Play England there are 10 principles for designing a successful play space.

- Play areas are ‘bespoke’ in design
- Play areas are well located
- Natural elements and resources are made use of

- Play spaces provide a wide range of play experiences
- Both disabled and non-disabled children have access
- Community needs are met
- Place spaces allow different ages of children to play together
- Play spaces allow children to experience risk and challenge in their play
- Play areas are appropriately maintained and sustainable
- Play spaces allow for change and evolution





Why Natural Play?



There is now a body of evidence, which shows the benefits of play in the natural environment:

- **Contact** with the natural environment promotes imaginative and social play;
- Playing in a natural environment improves children's social, mental and physical development, with some evidence of less bullying behaviour and better concentration at school;
- Children use the natural environment to recover from stress and this helps to reduce mental health disorders;
- Children are more likely to maintain high levels of physical activity when they play outdoors
- Playing in the natural environment provides opportunities for young people to experience, assess and

cope with modest risks (eg deciding whether to jump over a stream) and so helps counter the play limiting effects of a risk averse society.

(Fair play 2008 Plain English Research on Play, Sherbert Research for DCSF and COI, 2008)





Project Aims

- To conduct a full and meaningful consultation with at least 4 groups in Holmewood
- To find out how children like / want to play
- To explore how these needs can be met through the provision of a natural play area
- To facilitate a creative process in which participants can develop design ideas to meet these needs
- To support participants in engaging with the whole process by supporting a steering group
- To provide an exciting programme of activities, following the installation, to celebrate the launch of the new landscape and encourage children, young people and adults to use the new space.
- To provide a full evaluation of the project
- To produce a report of the findings from this project to be shared with partners

Methodology

Artworks identified 4 groups to work with throughout the project

- Ryecroft Primary School Year 3
- Ryecroft Primary School Reception
- St Christopher's Church and Salvation Army young people's groups
- Wedgewood Special School

The Project Co-ordinator, Emma Baylin, contacted the groups to set up the initial consultation sessions during the summer term and summer holidays. Unfortunately, as it was the end of the school year, due to the constraints of existing commitments and the school timetable it was not possible to arrange sessions at

Wedgewood, although the school did offer suggestions for how to make the play space more accessible for disabled children.

Artworks appointed two experienced artists, Dawn Sharkey and Larna Campbell to develop ideas for the creative consultation. Dawn and Larna worked with Michelle Lombart and Beverley Ellis, Play Officers from Bradford Council's Play team to develop the programme and ensure that the sessions were grounded in good play theory and practice. In the summer holidays Brad Wendes was recruited to run sessions using the discipline of parkour (the art of movement).



The artists were briefed to use a wide range of creative art forms to enable participants share experiences of play, explore possibilities and to facilitate the articulation of the children and young people's ideas and opinions. The idea of the workshops was to get beyond the simple question of what the children would like in their new play space and thoroughly explore how they play in order to design a space which meets their needs.

Some sessions were photographed and some participants' views were audio-recorded during the sessions. Some of these photos are quotes are included here.



Sessions

Ryecroft Primary School Reception:

The four and five year olds had two consultation sessions with the artists and the play workers. Initially the artists used

drawing to benchmark the children's attitudes to and experiences of play. This led on to multi-sensory activities to stimulate imaginary play ideas. Through den building and earth play sessions the young children were able to experience play with loose parts and natural resources and explore the possibilities of natural play.

'I like squishing it and making a mud house and then put sticks in it so they hold all the mud. I like making little gardens out of it'

Year 3

The seven and eight year olds were introduced to the aims and outcomes of the Landscape for Play project and had three sessions with the artists and playworkers in which they used 2D and 3D art forms to provoke responses to the brief. The first session was themed around imaginative play in which they used large scale drawing to map out places they like playing and designed fantasy play spaces for example an army fort and a princess's palace.





This developed into mask making and role play games. In the den building sessions the play workers facilitated outdoor den building while the artists created a sensory den to inform a more multi-sensory approach to developing ideas for the landscape. There was a very good response to the earth play session where the children could enjoy the tactile possibilities of soil and clay and made fantasy creatures and mini worlds.

There's a ladder that you should climb up to the path. Then if you climb over the slide there's a little volcano. If you climb up the wall to the top you'll fly up and then you can go yee-ha! Then you can jump off and there's a little tree with a little treehouse at the bottom of it. And I've got some water things to splash in and get a bucket and take it to your sand and make a sandcastle or you could make a sandcastle and then put water round it [like a moat]. Building dens was fun, you got to build your own and go to other people's.'



Young People

There were four sessions with young people at the Salvation Army with a choice of activities at each. As with the young children, the aim of the sessions was to help the young people explore their ideas for a natural play space based on how they liked to play. In addition, these sessions were to facilitate young people to produce designs for the landscape for play and to explore the concerns and solutions for a natural play space.



The young people took part in a Power of Ten exercise, using the venue's outdoor space to explore all the elements that need to be incorporated into a place space. This large-scale exercise quickly sparked off ideas and uncovered themes such as how to link the spaces and address the need to feel safe.



A book-making exercise helped the group explore how the site was and what needs to happen in order to create the sort of landscape they wanted to experience. The group also used 3D modelling techniques to create a model of the Valley site and design the features they wanted to include.



Parkour practitioner Brad Wendes worked with a group of young people to explore the how features of the landscape can be used to develop movement, balance and risk taking.

The creative sessions were very helpful in drawing out a lot of information about the

children and young people's aspirations for the site. The artists and playworkers were keen to raise the participants' awareness of the possibilities of the project and the exciting potential of play using natural resources, without building unrealistic expectations and it was clear by the end of the consultation process that they had achieved this.

The process also gave a good insight into the Holmewood community and its particular needs, for instance concerns around vandalism. The artists commented that they felt there was a culture of risk adversity that was coming from the parents and passed onto the children. Artworks had hoped to address this through meetings with the parents and discussions about their own childhood experiences, however although this session was arranged parents did not attend.

Project Findings

As a result of the workshops Artworks were able to draw up a list of requirements for the new play space. This section documents what participants in the consultation wanted to be able to do in the new natural play area and some of the most frequently requested items.

Participants wanted to be able to:

ROLL



HIDE / CRAWL



CLIMB





BALANCE



JUMP



BUILD



According to Play theory – it is essential for children to be able to express instinctive drives of types of play that stem from ancient, evolutionary survival mechanisms/ processes, eg building shelter/ dens. This is known as Recapitulative play

SIT





Participants wanted the site to include:

MUD



Play theory states that children must be able to manipulate the natural environment, and develop a power relationship with the physical environment. Here children can experience having control over the environment. This is known as Mastery Play.

SAND



Sand also relates to Mastery Play. Children with ADHD and short attention spans spend more time engaged in playing with these types of resources

WATER



“Water is a marvellous manipulative, multi sensory substance. As a play material it provides light, sound, touch and movement.”

Maudsley, M etc al, 2006 Playwork Partnerships. Playing on the Wildside

TUNNELS



“The play environment must not only be navigable, it must also be a place worth navigating, a place of tests, surprises, and challenges”

Bob Hughes. Play Types, speculations and possibilities, 2006

ROCKS / BOULDERS



BUMPS / DITCHES



STEPPING STONES



“The play environment must not only be navigable, it must also be a place worth navigating, a place of tests, surprises, and challenges”

Bob Hughes Play Types, speculations and possibilities, 2006

LOGS



“Loose parts give children the opportunity to have first hand physical experiences, which is associated with building capacity in children’s brains”

Maudsley, M etc al, 2006 Playwork Partnerships. Playing on the Wildside

NATURAL BORDERS , SOFT SURFACES, GRAVEL AND FLOWERS



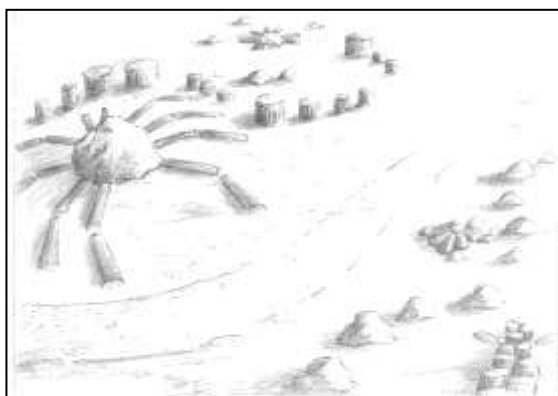
NATURAL HABITATS FOR WILDLIFE



Design and Launch

The results of the consultation process were passed to Parks and Landscape's Technical Officer Jana Bicanova who then created the design for the Valley Site.

The design was later presented to a small group of young people and adults who had been involved in the project. The young people (and some of the adults) found it hard to understand the technical drawings or visualise how the site would look from the sample photos used to illustrate materials. Artworks recruited Creedy, a skilled illustrator to draw aspects of the site to help the children and young people visualise some of the features of the site. As a result of the meeting some small changes were suggested.



Artworks had hoped to involve the groups in the installation stage of the project but due to time constraints and health and safety concerns this was not possible.

It had been nearly a year between the consultation stage and the completion of

the installation. Everyone was keen that the children and young people should see the outcome of their input and therefore a launch event was organised for June 2009. To keep momentum and interest in the project before the launch date a series of mosaic workshops were organised with young people from Step 2. The finished mosaics were installed at the site ensuring that the young people could see a direct link between their work and the project. Young people from the TFD Youth Club also took part in a number of graffiti sessions organised to name various areas of the site. These designs will be incorporated into the site in the future.

In order to support children and young people making the most of the new features of the landscape, Artworks invited the artists, the Play Team, Brad Wendes, storyteller Noel Watkins and Bradford Environmental Education Service to deliver activities at the launch event. On a very hot and sunny day children from Ryecroft School and young people from the Holmewood area took part in den building, natural art, parkour, bird box making, worm surveys, story telling and drumming activities. There was a great deal of positive feedback from the day and a sense of wonder and excitement about the potential for play from the new facilities.



Evaluation

During Autumn 2009, Artworks undertook creative evaluation games and discussion with three of the groups who took part in the original consultation. They also spoke to local residents and community workers to find out what they thought of the new natural play area

Ten of the children from Ryecroft Primary school who were involved in the consultation (now in Years 2 and 6) met to feedback their thoughts on the Valley. Most of the children visit the site more often since the natural play area was installed, although two mentioned that they only go when an older sibling will take them and one girl commented that she only plays round at home or at friends' houses. One child, who lives near the site said he goes everyday, but the others visit about once or twice a week. Seven of this group gave the natural play area a thumbs-up. Playing on the zip wire and the slide were far the most popular activities, although there was a lot of disappointment that the zip wire was out of action as it is broken. Climbing and jumping between the rocks and logs were also mentioned

"I like this kind of playground. I love the logs and jumping the rocks. I love

everything and don't want it teared down"

"You get excited if you are good at it – and it is good for you!"

"It is a good place for our age to play on, because you can jump, but you have to be careful and watch what you are doing."

Several of the children wanted to see more things at the Valley to keep it interesting, such as climbing frame, new zip wire and a bigger slide. They also wanted bins, a picnic area and a fair. They enjoy playing a wide range of games at the Valley, such as tig, hide and seek, football and riding bikes and scooters. On the whole the children liked the use of natural materials but felt they wanted more pieces of equipment too, like swings and slides and things for toddlers. The children put post-it notes comments on a map of the site. These indicated that some children are not aware of the wet areas or what some of the pieces were for or how to use them.



“We don’t use the rocks and wood much. It’s good for off-ground tig but we’re not good enough on our bikes to use it”

“On the bike area – how do you do it?”

The children who did not like the natural play area stated vandalism as the main reasons.

“There is too much rubbish and people can’t play. There is paint and glass all over the place and the zip wire is broken. Only the slide is safe”



Safety was a big concern for all the children, sometimes relating to the facilities themselves and sometimes relating to anti-social behaviour in the park, possibly reflecting comments they had heard from adults. One child explained that he is not allowed to go to the Valley on his own because his cousin’s friend had been beaten up there.

“Its OK for us, but there is too much rubbish and glass for the little ones and they can get hurt on rocks and gravel”

“There are dogs there and gangs there and they don’t let you play on stuff”

“It was safer when it was first made but now things are falling down. You can go through the woods because it’s quicker, but I have heard that you can be murdered.”

The Headteacher at Ryecroft felt that older children are often colonising the site and that the younger ones don’t feel it belongs to them. She felt that work needs to be done with parents to educate them on how to use the natural play facilities so that they would take their children there for a climb or a jump, in the same way younger children are often taken to the swings.

A total of 15 young people from youth groups at TFD centre and Salvation Army in Holmewood were consulted about the natural play area and their thoughts echoed some of the comments from the younger children. On average the young people were visiting the site about once a week, which is the same as or more often than before the natural play area was installed. There were divided opinions amongst the groups about site – some liked it but others thought it was a bit boring.

Most of them stated that the zip wire is the most popular places to play,



followed by the slide, although this is thought to be more for younger children. The bike track, logs and gravel were also mentioned by some, but most of the young people did not use these areas of the site. Like the younger children they are keen to have more equipment there, but their suggestions are more in keeping with the natural play theme, such as bigger jumps on the bike track, a climbing wall and a den or shelter for when it is raining. They also wanted a longer slide, a swing and a bigger zip wire.

As before, safety is the major concern. One person suggested a fence is needed behind the logs and gravel to stop bikes falling into the amphitheatre area, although it was not discovered whether this has actually happened! Young people, who are more likely to be in the park after dark, found it can be quite scary and suggested they would like lights all the way along the path. They also mentioned a defined area for dog walkers as dog mess is a problem at the site.

Local residents including secondary school children, families and older people who were at the Valley were asked their opinion about the site since. There were a wide range of opinions from the very positive to the very negative.

“Other parks just have normal things in but ours is different and unique. It makes me proud”

“I think it’s a dump. It been in less than a month and already it’s really mucky. They should spend their money on keeping TFD open for different age groups instead”



Some of the young people liked the use of natural materials, but most wanted more equipment as well, such as an army assault course. One group of students from Tong high School liked have places to sit and chill, as well as the equipment when it is working.

“I come here with my little brother and sister. They have a good time – they like sitting on the logs and I like catching them at the bottom of the slide. I think natural play is better because you can have a lot of fun, but people keep putting logs and sticks and leaves on stuff and making it really messy“

The opinions amongst parents and older people were very mixed .



“My daughter comes to play here a lot. When I ring here, she’s down at the Valley. As soon as it was done she was down here like a shot! I like the rocks, it’s a bit different. I’m not worried about her on them – kids will fall anyway. I’ve no worries about her safety.”

“I like it, but the vandals mean you can’t let them come down here and play. Families can’t use it much. It’s a nice thing, and quiet families want to come here and get off the street, but they can’t because of the hoodlums. Police never come and patrol it and they only tell them to move on.

“There’s glass everywhere, they’ve wrecked the zip wire, there’s drinking and horses. Swings and slides would be better. This is dangerous. I don’t let my kids play here. There’s druggies and rumours of a paedophile. I’ve not seen many kids playing here”

“It’s a good idea but how long will it last? This is less likely to get

vandalised but sooner or later it will get ruined. It looks better than before though and in the summertime there were lots of kids playing here. The council’s trying – but they can’t win”

The local opinion about the natural play area at the Valley appears to be split into three camps; those who like the new facilities, those who like the improvements but who are frustrated by the mess and vandalism and those who cannot see the Valley as a safe place to play, no matter what. One of the local youth workers commented that in his experience it takes a long time to change people’s minds in Holmewood and it would be hard to shift the Valley’s reputation as a dangerous place. However, on a walk through the site on a fine day, it was clear that the children and young people of Holmewood were using their imaginations and energy to develop new games and ways to play out in the Valley.



Holmewood Natural Play Area Consultation Participants Numbers

Date	Group	Numbers
22 April 08	Holmewood Community Council Meeting	
27 June 08	Ryecroft School Year 3	25
30 June 08	Year 3	25
2 July 08	Year 3	25
7 July 08	Ryecroft School Reception	20
7 July 08	Year 3	25
9 July 08	Reception	20
9 July	Holmewood Community Council Meeting	
10 July	Reception	20
11 July	Reception	20
14 July	Year 3	25
14 July	Reception	20
17 July	Year 3	25
17 July	Reception	20
26 August	Activate youth group Parkour and visual art session	8
27 August	Activate Parkour and visual art session	8
28 August	Activate Parkour and visual art session	7
29 August	Activate Parkour and visual art session	6
18 May 2009	Step 2 Mosaic session	4
19 May 2009	Step 2 Mosaic session	4
11 June 2009	TFD Youth Centre Site visit and graffiti design session	6
18 June 2009	TFD Youth Centre Graffiti painting session	6
22 June 2009	Launch Event (Ryecroft School & TFD Centre)	53



Artworks would like to give a special thank you to all the contributors to this project.

Bradford Parks and Landscapes Department

Early Years and Child Care Play Team

Ryecroft Primary School

Salvation Army, Holmewood

St Christopher's Church

Holmewood Parish Council

TFD Youth Club

Step 2

Dawn Sharkey

Larna Campbell

Brad Wendes

Frances Taylor

Ged Walker

Melanie St. Clair

