

CHILDREN'S PLAY ASSESSMENT

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1. Children's Play Areas - Introduction

- 1.1 Children's play areas in public parks are assessed for quality on a regular basis, this quality has up to recent times focused on the safety aspect of the equipment and a quantification of the equipment installed. Here there is a dichotomy between the quantitative and the qualitative assessment, the park maintenance man or planner preferring the solidity of undisputable quantity where as the play worker or social scientist may feel the truth lies in a qualitative appraisal.

2. Play Equipment Inspections

- 2.1 Presently Milton Keynes council records all inspection of the equipment on an electronic database using hand held units that can be taken on to site. This replaced the previous paper based system that was demanding on storage, records need to be kept for long periods of time, difficulty to interpret and time consuming to go back through. The system is able to measure other detail that may help to direct decision making i.e. numbers of user at a given time or level of rubbish.

3. Auditing of Play Spaces

- 3.1 Guidance for many years on play areas focused on catchment areas and the number and type of equipment, little regard for setting other than in safety terms or for the actual play value of the items and site. The context for past assessments has been around Planning Guidance Note 17 and the need for Local authorities to produce open space strategies, it is also a key feature in Local Plans and other planning documents. The development of the play area standards for provision has centred on the Six Acre Standard developed by the National Playing Fields Association (2001) now The Fields in Trust .
- 3.2 In the last few years significant improvement have been made to auditing of play spaces; play value has been added to the repertoire of the play ground inspector, types of motion are included but so are cognitive play forms such as imagination, role play and meeting. However, there is still little regard for the actual users.
- 3.3 For play workers and other play professional this is still too far removed from the realities of play "The main characteristic of play – child or adult – is not its content, but its mode. Play is an approach to action, not a form of activity Jerome Bruner (Moyles, 1989). This sentiment is taken up "Best Play" (2000) a guide to what play provision should do for children and how this can be objectively be

measured. The guide outlines 7 objectives and recommends that these are evaluated through the observation of the children. The approach is laudable but is limited by the numbers of suitably qualified observers and the number of setting and times that can be observations can be made.

- 3.4 The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has attempted to meld the qualitative and quantitative approaches in an engagement tool it calls SpaceShaper. SpaceShaper works by collecting the views of lots of different people through visiting a site and filling in a questionnaire. A half day workshop then gives everyone the chance to explain what they think about the space. This helps the people who use the space and those who manage it gain a better understanding of how it works for different people, and its strengths and weaknesses. This can help those who look after the space make changes to improve it. Spaceshaper goes much further than a simple analysis but the disadvantages are that it requires a large degree of input, trained staff and commitment.

4. Assessment of Play

- 4.1 In 2008 the Government through the Department for Children and Families (DCSF) set out new guidance for the design of play areas in Design for Play: A guide to creating successful play spaces (2008), many of the principles in this would be familiar to landscape architects. Inadvertently, the perception of the document had a propensity to encourage “natural play”.
- 4.2 Milton Keynes Council has developed its own play area assessment technique which has been used it evaluate play sites, this includes the equipment and setting. The evaluation mixes quantitative data i.e. scoring and qualitative assessment i.e. value judgment, it is suggested a minimum of two people carry out the assessment so the detail can be discussed. To complete the assessment requires some understanding of play and also of the local setting and community. However, the assessment will always be subjective so if possible all sites in an area should be evaluated by the same people to ensure they can be compared evenly latter.
- 4.3 Set out below is an example of the Council's assessment of a play area, the example given is Great Holm Play Area.

Name of Play Area: Great Holm Milton Keynes

Redesigned in 2010 – Playbuilder – Cost £80,000

Over view of the park; the park is in the centre of the estate where 4 roads cross at the obelisk roundabout, these are fairly quiet estate roads. The park is split in two, to the left is a large hill made when the estate was built, this contains the older children's play equipment and offers good views across the city. To the right is the community centre and adjacent to this is the fenced junior area. Behind the community centre there is an area of flat ground where ball sports are played

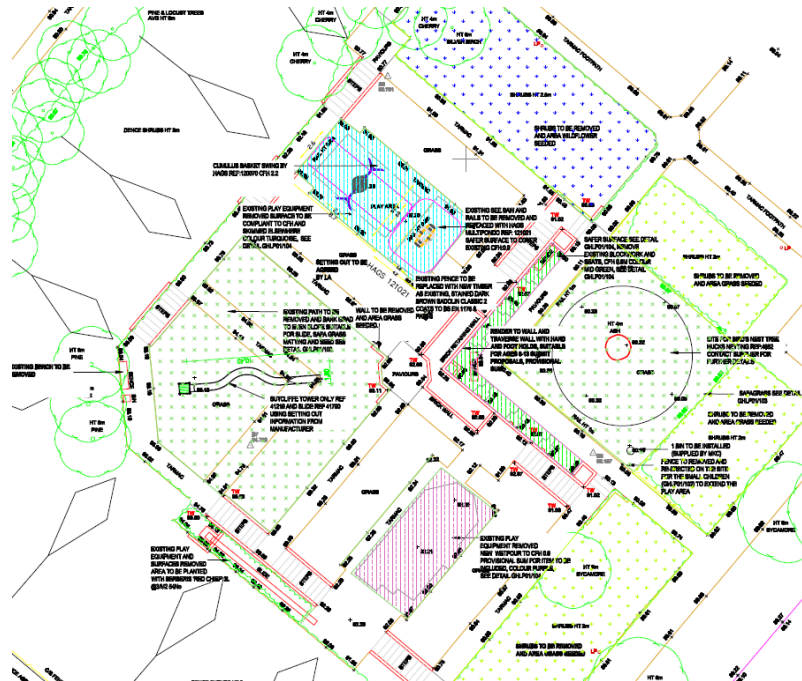
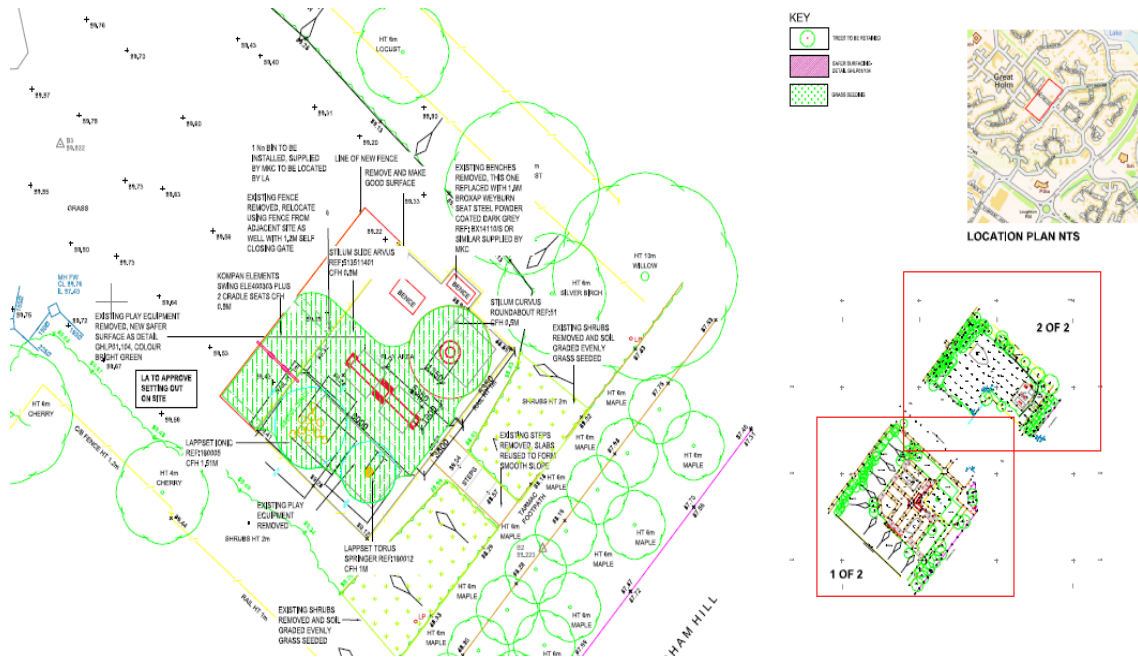


A



B

A – Fenced area for younger children, this is also used by the play group. B Formal area with ramped paths leading to the top, where a parkour (urban running) unit has been installed .



Revised design of the park, emulating the previous park design, original shrub planting removed to increase views in and out of park, new equipment for all ages, parkour element added and climbing wall created from large retaining wall and younger children's area with new small multi play and other equipment for the under 4 year olds – gate links this with adjacent nursery school.

Great Holm local Play	<u>Yes/No</u>	<u>Comments/Description</u>
<u>Type:</u> NEAP	Yes	
Local Plan compliant in terms of type, area, distance from dwellings and basic content	No	
<u>Context /Suitability:</u>		
High Density (Urban)		
Medium Density (Urban)	X	Homes with front and rear gardens, most linking to small shared court spaces or other incidental open space.
Low Density (Urban)		
Sub-Urban		
Rural		
<u>Constraints</u> : Covenants, TPO, easements, reserved site	None Known	
<u>Physical Quality</u>	Score out of 5	
All site installations and equipment well maintained	4	No issues other than litter
Soft and/or hard landscape well maintained	4	Limited palette in good condition, only issue is excessive use of herbicide causing some wear to path edges
High quality setting - hard and soft landscape and features/equipment	3	Vegetation well managed as a whole, potential to explore wooded periphery on older children's side but on steep slope

Play value to intended level - existing interest	3	Good activities for wheeled sport for both young and old, limited tactile experiences for the very young
Scope and opportunities for improvement	2	Limited, possible table tennis table or fitness equipment
Serviceable lifespan in years of existing site	>10 (4)	Mostly new equipment
Is site quality capable of economic improvement	5	Some small improvements could be made, improved planting would make the site more attractive to non users, i.e. the elderly
Total Score:	21/35	
Inherent Qualities	Score out of 5	
Favourable aspect, light, open and good visibility	5	Junior play area is near to road and path, senior side is on a hill and well surveyed
Does the play area have natural shade	4	Wooded periphery and high wall.
Good relationship with built environment and local dwellings	4	Close to homes, bus stop and community centre, linked to redway and local schools
Good level of surveillance from adjacent dwellings and paths	4	Close to homes on opposite side of the road and at a junction of roads through the estate
Total Score:	17/20	
<u>Inherent Defects</u>	Score out of 5	
Appropriate design	4	Gradient and existing features dictated to some degree the improvements, the play features make the most of the elevated position with the slide at the highest point backed by the semi mature Wellingtonia. The seating area has created a climbing wall facing the striking climbing frame. The junior side is more traditional,

		wet pour and fence, use of large springer increases use to the less able and promotes shared experience
Quality of build or economically serviceable	4	Mostly new equipment –Stainless steel and other high quality materials
Maintenance to appropriate standard	4	All functioning
Relationship with local dwellings	4	Close to homes and in the centre of the estate
Is the site free of vandalism or misuse	2	Graffiti and vandalism evident, used by senior children at lunch hour – rubbish evident
Total Score:	18/25	
<u>Usage/Performance</u>		
How well does the play area / site serve its intended area :-		
Immediate area [LAP/LEAP]	Yes	
Neighbourhood [LEAP/NEAP]	Yes	
Wider area [NEAP]	YES	Good range of facilities near to local schools
Is the play area part of a larger public open space.	Yes	
Does the play area cater for intended ages group [LAP<6 -LEAP<8/9 - NEAP<12/13]	Yes	Meets local plan standard for NEAP
Does the site provide significant or adequate play value in accordance with type	Adequate	
Do site constraints mitigate against continued use as a viable play area	No	

<u>Accessibility /Security</u>		
Is the site DDA / Access for All compliant [surfaces, gradients, path widths]	No	
To what extent is equipment DDA compliant	Partially	Not all equipment is accessible, good paths and some suitable equipment
Is there good access/connectivity with the locality and to other play facilities	Yes	Through redway system
Is there good access for all within the wider site	Yes	Good sight lines and paths
Are public routes to the site overlooked / good surveillance	Yes	
Local Public Views		
Discussion / questioning must be structured and focused to enable comparative evaluation		
Is the play area valued by local people	Yes	Observations show the park is well used particularly after school and holidays
Is there a significant difference of opinion locally on the value of the play area	No	Only one adverse comment in consultation, regarding possible anti social behaviour
What is the local Town/ Parish council view	Supportive	Involved but limited input, meetings were held on site
Opportunities		
Does the site have unused play potential or capacity for significant improvement	No	There is still some potential but it is important to keep some open space for ball games etc
Is the location, size, access and capacity suitable for	No	Parking limited and size of park too

consideration as a Strategic Neighbourhood Play Area. (SNPA)		small.
Is the site providing or economically able to provide a significant play opportunity for its locality	Yes	Yes – heavily used
Can access be improved : [a] easily; [b] with some difficulty; [c] with great difficulty [d] cannot be improved	B	Potential pedestrian crossing between areas
<u>Possible Alternative Uses</u> [For further consider on completion of wider area evaluations, for sites lacking the capacity for reasonable level of a play service delivery or not capable of significant improvement]	Not applicable	