

# Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy

Let's make play stay!



## Foreword



As a child I remember the sense of great adventure, freedom, and sheer joy I experienced when playing outdoors with my friends, whether it was tearing around the streets on our bikes, or climbing trees in the nearby woodlands.

The opportunities for our own children to enjoy play seem to have diminished in recent years. Nowadays, we often worry about our children falling prey to bullying, strangers and the

dangers of traffic. Whether these fears are based on real threats or our perceptions of the dangers that might be lurking in our streets and parks, it is these fears are denying our children the opportunities that we took for granted.

Children like to play outdoors, they enjoy and learn from the risk in play and want the opportunity to explore. We all know that play is fun, but it also has a major impact on developing children's social, physical and emotional well-being. Excellent quality play and free-time helps to improve the quality of life for everyone in Darlington.

I'm honoured that I have been asked to be our Play Champion. Darlington Borough Council has taken a lead role in developing this 'Play and Free-time Strategy' together with key partner agencies who have an interest in play and recognise the importance of play in a child's development.

Darlington Borough Council has worked closely with the community in creating this Play and Free-time Strategy with the aim of making excellent quality play and free-time opportunities more readily available to all children and young people across the Borough. Play has a huge impact on our children's lives and so helps to create a better community for all residents.

It is so important that we as a society invest in our children and young people. Projects relating to improving communication and engagement with children and young people, developing natural play opportunities and providing better facilities for teenagers have my full support.

This is why I am delighted to formally endorse this important strategy. I would especially like to thank the members of the Play Partnership, who have made such a significant contribution in helping create this exciting strategy.



## Acknowledgements



A large number of people were involved in the development of the *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy* and the Darlington Play Partnership would like to thank all who contributed.

Most importantly, the Darlington Play Partnership would like to express its thanks to the children, young people and parents, as well as teachers and community workers, at the following schools, youth groups and organisations:

- Mount Pleasant Childrens Centre
- DASH Playscheme, and DAD
- Branksome School
- The Education Village (Haughton Community School)
- Longfield School
- Hurworth School
- The Easter Trampolining Playscheme at Longfield School
- The Easter Basketballl Playscheme at The Dolphin Centre
- The Dolphin Centre

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## Summary

Welcome to Darlington's new Play and Free-time Strategy, the area's first comprehensive review of play. This important document has been created by the Darlington Play Partnership, a new body of local organisations committed to improving play and free-time activities for children and young people.

The Play and Free-time Strategy is based on an independent assessment of what play and free-time activities currently exist in Darlington and what, given projected population growth, is likely to be required in terms of future facilities and services (see 'path to play' diagram on page 7). Most importantly, its development involved over 450 local children, young people, parents, community members and organisations. The main play and free-time issues that everybody thought were the top priorities are detailed below:

- Access for all – all children and young people should be able to access quality play and free-time opportunities and should not be disadvantaged by where they live, their cultural or socio-economic background, their disabilities and special needs, or their age.
- Attitudes to play – Negative attitudes of adults towards children and young people and their free-time activities often prevents quality play provision from being located in the communities where it is needed. Campaigning for and promoting positive messages about young people

and their play and free-time needs to the wider community is a priority.

- Youth provision – Access to quality play and free-time opportunities for all age groups from 0 to 18 years is a priority, but at the time of writing the strategy the gap in provision that has been identified is for older children and teenagers, therefore the short term priority for projects is to provide more opportunities for young people.

Therefore, the overall aim of the Play and Free-time Strategy is to...

*...Make play stay*

*The vision of the Darlington Play Partnership is to make quality play and free-time happen in Darlington for all children and young people now and in the future.*

*Building on a strong foundation of a child focussed Borough the Play and Free-time Strategy will endeavour to make quality play and free-time opportunities accessible for all children and young people regardless of age, ability, background or where they live. As well as improving the infrastructure for play in both urban and rural wards the play strategy will campaign to raise the profile of play as a vital part of children and young people's enjoyment and achievement.*

In essence this strategy significantly contributes to the 'Enjoying and Achieving' outcome in the government's *Every Child Matters* agenda by supporting exciting, challenging and safe (though not completely risk-free) play and free-time opportunities for children and young people. So, that within reason, they can do what they want, when they want and where they want.

The *Play and Free-time Strategy* will importantly benefit the whole community because a community that encourages and supports children and young people playing will be a cohesive and tolerant one - cohesive because what worked in times gone by was adults looking out for kids in their neighbourhood and getting involved if a child was in difficulty (something we need to return to); tolerant because adults will not presume that groups of kids are intent on criminal damage if young people are provided with better places to be.

So why is play so important? Play has been shown by experts to be as important to the mental, physical and social development of children and young people as formal education. Improving play and free-time opportunities can also help other organisations in Darlington to fulfil their aims: health professionals need to reduce obesity, the police need to reduce anti-social behaviour and, by showing where play and free-time is most needed in Darlington, the Council could access potential funding from developers.

Surely children and young people when left to their own devices are happy playing and (when older) hanging out, just like their parents, grandparents or carers did when they were young... aren't they?

Research shows that what children and young people want is much the same as it was, ten, twenty, thirty years ago. But like the country as a whole, increases in traffic, building, negative attitudes towards young people hanging out in public spaces (mostly unfounded) and parents' /carers' fears for children's safety (also greatly exaggerated), have drastically limited play and free-time opportunities.

However, despite these many challenges, this strategy offers an excellent opportunity to provide a more joined up approach to developing play, which will be further enhanced by an additional £250,000 awarded by Big Lottery. Below are some of the most important schemes the Play Partnership will be implementing over the next few years.

- o Denes Multi Use Games Area (MUGA)
- o Lascelles MUGA
- o Heighington MUGA
- o 'The Living Room' – Youth Shelters
- o Community Play Opportunities for 5-13 year olds
- o *Play Champion* who can influence other decision makers, such as councillors and partner organisations (e.g. Youth Service, Local Strategic Partnership, Children's Trust)
- o Working with the area's extended school co-ordinator to ensure that play and free-time activities are seriously considered as part of what they offer
- o Implementing the Council's *Greenways Strategy* to improve cycle and footpaths around the

Borough ensuring children and young people can get to activities

- Offering better training for all those involved in providing play and free-time activities on the needs of children and young people with disabilities

- Measuring the improvements in play and free-time activities by asking children, parents and young people if things have improved

From councillors to parents, chief executives to pensioners, we must remember that quality play and free-time is a right, not a luxury. By producing this document, Darlington's Play Partnership has created a clear path to develop play and its legacy will be to improve the quality of life for the whole community.

Draft

**Figure 1: The Path to Play planning process**





## 1 What is a 'Play and Free-time Strategy'?



This document sets out what organisations in Darlington Borough will do between 2007 and 2012 to improve the quality of play opportunities<sup>1</sup> for the Borough's children and young people.<sup>2</sup>

Through the approach shown in the 'Path to Play' diagram, particularly the engagement of partners, parents and, most importantly, children and young people (see section 8), the Darlington Play Partnership has developed this Play and Free-time Strategy to deliver improved play across the Borough.

The following sections of the *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy* set out:

- Why does Darlington need a Play and Free-time Strategy?
- What is play?
- What are the benefits of play?
- Who is responsible for the Play and Free-time Strategy?
- How will the Play and Free-time Strategy fit with other plans?
- What is the Darlington population?
- What play and free-time stuff is needed?
- What are the play and free-time priorities?
- What are the play ACTIONS?

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<sup>1</sup> The strategy uses the term 'play opportunities' to denote all ways that children and young people play. From this point in the document, play is referred to alongside 'free-time' activities (i.e. those for older children and young people, aged 12 to 19).

<sup>2</sup> In line with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the term child is mainly used in this strategy to refer to anyone under the age of eighteen. However, the meaning of the phrase young people will be evident by its context.

## 2 Why does Darlington need a Play and Free-time Strategy?

There are a number of important reasons why a Play and Free-time Strategy will benefit the children and young people of Darlington, as well as their parents or carers, communities and the many organisations that are trying to improve play opportunities in Darlington.

- Firstly, the strategy provides a co-ordinated and joined up approach to developing play through prioritised actions based on evidence of need
- Secondly, because *all* the issues around play for children and young people are properly considered, it means that a more inclusive approach can be adopted rather than just meeting the needs of those who 'shout loudest'
- Thirdly, by demonstrating that issues of play have been properly considered, it means that agencies such as the Council, the voluntary sector and so on, can make clear allocations of finances or staff to make the actions happen
- Fourthly, this hard evidence approach provides the basis for bids to organisations such as the Big Lottery, trusts and charities for further funding
- Fifthly, a Play and Free-time Strategy is essential in helping deliver many of the government's *Every Child Matters* targets while raising the value and importance of play locally

- Finally, under planning legislation, the evidence of 'play need' gathered for the Play and Free-time Strategy can be used to help negotiate with property developers to provide improved play spaces when they are granted planning permission for developments such as housing estates, town centre regeneration etc.

## 3 Who is responsible for the Play and Free-time Strategy?

### 3.1 Background

The *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy* has been developed in consultation with children, young people, partners and carers with the wider community, by a range of organisations who together form the Darlington Play Partnership. As noted previously, the Play Partnership will remain after the strategy is launched and members can leave and join as appropriate. The Play Partnership will take forward the Play and Free-time Strategy. The sections below highlight the Borough's vision for play, the Partnership's objectives and how it will deliver the strategy.

### 3.2 Vision

Make play stay

The vision of the Darlington Play Partnership is to make quality play and free-time happen in Darlington for all children now and in the future.

Building on a strong foundation of a child focused Borough the Play and Free-time Strategy will endeavour to make quality play and free-time opportunities accessible for all children and young people regardless of age, ability, background or where they live. As well as improving the infrastructure for play in both urban and rural wards the Play and Free-time Strategy will campaign to raise the profile of play as a vital part of children and young people's enjoyment and achievement.

### 3.3 Objectives

To deliver the vision, the Darlington Play Partnership will do the following:

- Encourage a strategic approach to play to enable the best use of resources
- Promote and raise the profile and the importance of play to children, childcare providers, young people, their parents and communities
- Ensure that play is included on agendas of other groups and is integrated with appropriate plans such as The Children and Young People Plan, and the Open Spaces Strategy.
- Ensure mechanisms are in place, which encourage all stakeholders to make an ongoing contribution to future planning processes/play provision

- Develop, monitor, review and evaluate the Play and Free-time Strategy and the appropriate targets
- Make recommendations to relevant partnerships in respect of allocation of play funding and other appropriate funding opportunities
- Measure progress against standards set by the Play Council's performance indicators and those agreed at a local level by the Partnership
- Maximise external funding for play, e.g. section 106 agreements
- The objectives are based on the Partnership's research and consultation, as well as national and local good practice.

### 3.4 The Play Partnership

The Play Partnership is made up of statutory, voluntary and other organisations that have active involvement in children and young people's play and free-time. The Partnership's membership will be reviewed during the delivery of the *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy*.

The following are the founder members involved. They, like future members, must have a working knowledge and understanding of children and young people's play/free-time activities and be committed to ensuring that best play needs are met. Appendix 1 details the membership of the Partnership and exactly how the Partnership was formed and how it will operate.

Sarah	Small	Play Development Co-ordinator	Red Hall Community Partnership
Kirsty	Thomson	Regional Development Officer	Play England
Michele	Deans	Regional Programme Manager	Play England
Mirren	Hunter	Policy Development Officer	Darlington Borough Council
Tom	Beales	Sports Development Officer	Darlington Borough Council
Brian	Graham	Head of Street Scene	Darlington Borough Council
Andrew	Carter	Planning Officer	Darlington Borough Council
Martin	Landers	Centre Manager	Firthmoor and District Community Association
Mervyn	Bell	Head of Youth Services	Darlington Borough Council
Kate	Hinchliffe	Extended Schools Co-ordinator	Darlington Borough Council
Jacki	Hiles	Development Manager	Darlington Association on Disability
Lynn	Kilpatrick	Locality Manager	Connexions
Kevin	Kelly	Senior Practitioner of Children Disabilities Team	Darlington Borough Council
Paula	Akers	Children's Fund Coordinator	Darlington Borough Council
Nigel	Potter	Darlington Programme Manager	Groundwork North East
Sheelagh	Nevison	Childcare Development Officer	Darlington Borough Council
Sharon	Brown	Head of Performance and Community Partnerships	Darlington Borough Council
Roy	Broadbent	Strategic Support Manager	Darlington Borough Council
Steve	Thompson	Assistant Director for Darlington Community Services	Darlington Borough Council

### 3.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

objectives for the Council and Community.

The Play Partnership will also be responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of progress throughout the life of the strategy. This key co-ordination and steering role would also be supported by both the Council's Environment Scrutiny Committee and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee to assess progress and ensure that the strategy delivers its key



## 4 What is play?



### 4.1 Background

*Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.<sup>3</sup>*

The right to play is considered so important to the development of children and young people that the

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations 1971 *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*

United Nations included the previous statement in its *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

The leading UK body on play, the Children's Play Council, defines 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.<sup>4</sup>*

The Joint National Committee on Training for Play work describes play as follows:

*Play is an innate drive and is essential for human development. It is manifested as behavior that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. The value of play derives from the play process itself, not from any extrinsic goal, reward or end product. Play is often spontaneous and unpredictable. Through play children experience their world and their relationship with it.<sup>5</sup>*

It is this self directed 'free-play' that the action plan (section 11) seeks to facilitate in Darlington.

Definitions of play do not normally include organised sport. However, play activities (e.g. kicking a ball about on local open space) may lead into positive outcomes offered by formalised sport activities.

Play is also important because it allows those children and young people who are not sporting or innately

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2004 *Getting Serious About Play?*

<sup>5</sup> Joint National Committee on Training for Playwork 2003 *Charter for Playwork Education and Qualification*

competitive to gain exercise and develop physically and socially.

Often, play is thought of as something for younger children, perhaps for 'toddlers' aged between 0 and 5 year to 'juniors' aged 6 to 10. However, play is for all, and the *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy* focuses on 0-19 year olds:

*Children and young people of all ages play. As they get older the words they use to describe their activities change and they tend to use terms, which describe specific activities rather than the generic term 'play'. The term 'play' is used to include the free-time activities of children and young people.*<sup>6</sup>

For older children or 'seniors' between 11 and 14 or 'young people' aged 15 to 19,<sup>7</sup> 'play' is not something they necessarily think of or want to be associated with. Play is 'uncool', something that 'younger kids do', often with their parents. However, seniors and young people have their own types of play, including hanging out, skating and watching bands (i.e. 'free-time').

Play is also often thought of in terms of 'fixed play equipment' such as swings and roundabouts. But important though these are, play is, and can be, so much more than this. It can be skateboarding (which is considered a sport by Sport England but is often

seen as play by skaters), climbing trees, attending a play scheme or messing in the park.

It is important that this strategy broadens community and support agencies' views of what is *valid* play. The research for this Play and Free-time Strategy (see section 8) showed that the range of play and free-time activities and their value was not understood by many parents and agencies and the action plan at the rear of this strategy seeks to address this (see section 11).

## 4.2 Play definitions

Having outlined the wide ranging approach to play that the Darlington Play Partnership wishes to take, the following section gives definitions, which were integral to the development of the Play and Free-Time Strategy and will guide its implementation.

### 4.2.1 Play 'opportunities' and 'provision'

Play *opportunities* refer to situations and environments where children and young people *choose* to play. This can include places or locations intended (see play 'provision' below) or *not* intended for play and which may be safe or unsafe. An example of play *opportunities* outside of official play *provision* includes skateboarding near a shopping centre (probably moderate risk, but often not accepted by shoppers or the centre owners).

Play *provision* refers to play opportunities that take place in settings, which have been specifically designated or planned by adults (and hopefully increasingly in conjunction with children and young

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<sup>6</sup> Cole-Hamilton I & Gill T 2002 *Making the Case for Play*

<sup>7</sup> There is considerable debate over what age children might naturally fall into specific types of play activities. These age bands are used solely for guidance, and are not definitive.

people) for this purpose. In recent years this provision has often been in response to an erosion of 'natural' play opportunities due to fear, a risk adverse society and the dominance of traffic.<sup>8</sup> Play *provision* can be indoor or outdoor, staffed or unstaffed, with or without equipment, static or mobile and free or charging.

#### 4.2.2 Play 'spaces' and play 'schemes'

For the purposes of understanding what play exists in Darlington and what is needed, play *opportunities* are divided into two types - play *schemes* and play *spaces*. *Schemes* are play *provision* that are time bound and organised in some way, such as after school clubs or holiday splash schemes. Play *spaces* are any locations which are used by children or young people to play regardless of whether it is designed to be a 'play' space, e.g. this could be a neighbourhood play area for toddlers, or it could be a bus shelter that teenagers hang out in after school.

#### 4.2.3 'Structured' and 'unstructured' play

Play *provision* may be *structured* or *unstructured*. *Structured* play are those practices that are guided by rules or conventions, or where children and young people are led through a 'play' or 'free-time' activity by an adult. *Structured* play is usually supervised.

Some play experts argue that there is too much *structured* play (often due to parents' concerns about

safety or achievement) and not enough *unstructured* free play, which develops different social and physical skills. This Play and Free-time Strategy supports free play actions when possible, but also addresses the popularity of structured play with children and young people, their parents, the wider community and agencies of Darlington (see section 8).

*Unstructured* play is, ostensibly, where there are no rules or conventions e.g. tree climbing. This is usually unsupervised, but not always, e.g. an after school club with a playworker may still be unstructured because there are a large number of 'free play' activities (e.g. playing with building bricks) and a child can choose from a number of activities without leadership from the playworker running the activity.

#### 4.2.4 'Supervised' and 'unsupervised' play

Play can be *supervised* or *unsupervised*. *Unsupervised* is self explanatory. However, *supervised* play may take a number of forms. This could include an after school club where the supervision is mainly about the safety provided by an adult's presence. It may also refer to 'grey' areas of play provision such as a workshop where an arts development worker guides children to create a finished product, e.g. a sculpture. Some play specialists would argue that this type of activity, like structured play noted above, is not true 'free play' e.g. freely chosen by the child or young person (see below).

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<sup>8</sup> Worpole K 2002 *No Particular Place to Go*

#### 4.2.5 'Free to play' and 'pay to play'

This strategy concentrates on play/free-time opportunities that are '**freely chosen**', '**free to access**' and '**free to come and go**' (what is often known as the 'three frees'). This is in line with the thinking from play professionals, funding bodies such as the Big Lottery and government policy. That is, if play provision is to be inclusive, then a sufficient amount of it, which should be of ever increasing quality, must be provided free of charge. However, the strategy does not exclude 'pay to play' provision because at present, virtually all play *schemes* in the Borough have a (subsidised) entry fee. Likewise, there may be opportunities to work with those owners of 'pay to play' play schemes and spaces to provide free or substantially reduced cost provision, perhaps providing this through extended schools.

#### 4.3 Summary

Generally, the evidence suggests that less structured and supervised play/free-time opportunities offer equally (if not more) important physical, social and mental benefits to children and young people to structured activities. This 'free play' approach is reinforced throughout this strategy and action plan. Actions are particularly sought that allow children and young people to 'play' in their own ways, rather than in ways that adults think they might want. There is a strong emphasis on improving the free play value of existing spaces where children and young people play or would like to play e.g. parks, school playgrounds etc. rather than providing more supervised or highly structured play schemes (see section 11).

## 5 What are the benefits of play?

### 5.1.1 The power of play

This Play and Free-time Strategy should, by now, have demonstrated that it should be enough to justify investing in play, simply because children and young people enjoy it, even though it does not produce easily 'measurable' outputs.

Yet there is a very strong case to be made for the social, cultural and economic value of play/free-time. It can help other aspects of children and young people's development, such as their mental and physical health, formal learning and their ability to relate to other children, young people and adults.

By communicating these benefits to partner organisations, these partners can better understand how play and free-time helps them achieve their own organisational goals (e.g. tackling crime, reducing obesity etc.). Therefore development of the Play Partnership will be important to the long-term sustainability of improving play in the Borough (see action 1.0).

Below are some of the major benefits that children and young people, as well as society as a whole, can receive from investing in play and free-time activities. These assertions are taken from academic studies and can be used in the *Darlington Play and Free-time Marketing Plan* referred to in the action plan (see section 11).

- o *Play and free-time* develops informed risk-taking behaviour and creativity which serves children well in later life



- *Play and free-time improves mental and physical health*, and can play a notable part in addressing issues of obesity
- *Play and free-time fosters social inclusion* by allowing children and young people of different backgrounds to interact as equals
- *Play and free-time* gives children and young people the chance to 'let off steam', reducing pressure on schools and family situations
- *Play and free-time can reduce crime and vandalism* by channeling children and young people's energies into positive activities
- *Play and free-time benefits families and community*, through the creation of social networks and a sense of community.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the overwhelming evidence about the benefits of play and free-time, a range of organisations in the Borough has come together to raise awareness of the value of play, develop this strategy and action plan and make it happen. The next section outlines how this will work.

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<sup>9</sup> For further details of the original research, see the reference list in the separate Appendices document.

## 6 How does the Play and Free-time Strategy fit with other plans?

If the *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy* is to maximise its impact on improving the quality and availability of play in the Borough, it is vital that it fits with existing plans and strategies that affect children, young people and their environment.

The following section shows how the Play and Free-time Strategy will avoid duplication and how it will create a play infrastructure that is embedded in the full spectrum of the Borough's policies. It also highlights gaps and opportunities that the action plan (see section 11) in this strategy can address.

Policies fall into a tiered system, i.e. 'this policy falls under that policy', or 'this policy sits above that policy'. The policies at the top of the tier system are the national policies, and the most relevant in this case is *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (2004). These policies outline the aims of the Government for the whole country, and all policies that come under the national policies have to relate directly to their aims and deliver their objectives.

Because Darlington is a unitary authority the next tier of policies is the Borough policies themselves, and these policies carry forward the aims of the national policies, and also contain specific information about how those aims will be achieved in Darlington.

There are some regional policies that sit above Darlington Borough policies, but these are mainly about economics and planning, and there is no

regional policy for children and young people. Within the Borough policies there is still a number of different levels and types of policy that all work together.

### 6.1 The Community Strategy "Where quality comes to life"

In Darlington the main policy (the top tier of Borough policy) is the Community Strategy: *Where quality comes to life*. This has been produced by The Darlington Partnership, which is a partnership between all of the organisations that are responsible for delivering public services in Darlington, including Darlington Borough Council, other public service organisations and local businesses. *Where quality comes to life* is a visioning document that sets out four themed goals that provide the background to all Darlington strategies, including this Play and Free-time Strategy. It identifies children and young people as a priority, which is good news for the Play and Free-time Strategy. The four goals are 'An area creating and sharing prosperity', 'A location for learning, achievement and leisure', 'A place for living safely and well', and 'A high quality environment with excellent communication links'.

Below the Community Strategy sits the Local Area Agreement with allocates resources and funding to the Partnerships strategic priorities.

### 6.2 Darlington Local Area Agreement: "Young people – our future"

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) exist to pool together government funds allocated to councils and other

partners to allow a more strategic approach to delivering public services. Again this major Darlington policy has children and young people as a strong priority.

The *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy* has a major role to play in helping contribute towards the Children and Young People, Safer and Stronger Communities, and the Healthier Communities and Older People blocks.

Play and free-time provision is clearly recognised within the LAA and priorities include:

- Development of a comprehensive, 52 week programme of Leisure, Arts and Youth provision, delivered in the local community,
- Development of a sustainable programme of diversionary activities,
- Increasing community capacity through volunteering opportunities for young people.
- Development of a Play and Free-time Strategy for young people of all ages.
- To increase the numbers of children who are positively engaged in their free time – achieving personal and social development

The newly formed Darlington Play Partnership offers a direct link into the Darlington Partnership. The development of free high quality play is vitally important in helping create safer local communities by offering children and young people opportunities to participate in fun and meaningful activities that they choose to undertake.

Within the Darlington Partnership sit five working groups, including The Childrens Trust who will be most closely linked to this Strategy, and also the economy and environment group, the learning and culture partnership, the community safety partnership and the health improvement and social inclusion group.

Associated with these working groups are a tier of policies including the Darlington Children and Young Peoples Plan 2006-2009: Investing in Tomorrow.

Below Investing in Tomorrow sit several targeted policies such as the Youth Strategy and the Early Years Plan.

### **6.3 The business plans**

The final tier of policy is the business plans, which outline in detail the aims, budgets and targets for all of the partnership members' tasks in delivering the various strategies, including Investing in Tomorrow.

### **6.4 Every Child Matters and the Children and Young People Plan 2006-2009 "Investing in tomorrow"**

The Government, as part of its drive to deliver joined up services for children and young people, launched its Every Child Matters: Change for Children green paper in 2004. This put a duty on councils and their partners to work together to improve the support for children, young people and their families across five areas.

Improved play and free-time activities in Darlington can contribute to all five of the 'Every Child Matters'

areas as carried through in Investing in Tomorrow. [In brackets are the local strategic aims as specified in the Investing in Tomorrow which the Play and Free-time Strategy can support delivery of]

Being healthy [‘Enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle’]

Staying safe [‘being protected from harm and neglect’]

Enjoying and achieving [‘achieving personal and social development and enjoying recreation’]

Contributing positively [‘being involved with the community and society, not engaging in anti social behaviour’ and ‘engage in law abiding and positive behaviour in and out of school and post 16’.]

Achieving economic well-being [‘not being prevented by economic disadvantage from achieving their full potential’].

In addition to covering the five aims above, consultation with children, young people and parents across the Borough found that there were a number of things that the children and young people of Darlington want which this Play and Free-time Strategy can help deliver, e.g. greater access to subsidised sport and leisure opportunities, increase the number and type of after school clubs, improve street lighting and lighting in parks and open spaces, more youth clubs and greater access to a wider menu of sports, leisure and arts activities at affordable prices.

The Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy will sit below Investing in Tomorrow and will identify specific

aims in relation to play and free-time activities for children and young people and set out an action plan for how these aims can be achieved.

It is positive that The Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy has been developed in line with Investing in Tomorrow so that there are no obvious contradictions or duplication. Development of the Play and Free-time Strategy and recruitment of play workers is listed in the actions within Investing in Tomorrow, as well as other mentions of the development of safe places for young people to hang out. This means that there is already a strong strategic link between these two strategies and this must be further developed by ensuring that this link is maintained in the development of future strategies.

This means that as well as a strong strategic link, alongside the Big Lottery Play Fund that has been allocated to Darlington there may be additional funding for play workers and play facilities already identified. However, in order to ensure the long term sustainability of implementing the Play and Free-time Strategy the Borough needs to also look elsewhere within the Local Area Agreement for resource opportunities.

## **6.5 Children’s Centres**

Children’s centres and extended schools (see below) are major Government initiatives that have been developed in order to deliver a holistic approach to services for children and young people. The focus of children’s centres is on childcare for the under fives and they are a major part of the delivery of childcare



strategies and early years education, although the children's centre agenda is much broader and it will also support health, training and social functions. Initially targets for children's centres were in the 20% most deprived communities, but now the targets have been increased and the aim is for every community to have access to a centre.

Children's centres in Darlington will play an important role in the delivery of the Play and Free-time Strategy. Play already features strongly in the four existing children's centres, but it is vital that play remains high on the agenda for future Darlington's children's centres (see section 11). Proposed rural outreach from children's centres could be utilized to plug the gap in rural play provision as identified in the consultation (see action x.x). Outdoor facilities at the children's centres also provide a focus for play for older children, particularly in areas where a lack of play provision has been identified, such as at the Mount Pleasant Children's Centre. Whilst not in the remit of children's centres, this is an important facility and can be supported through the Play and Free-time Strategy.

## **6.6 Extended schools**

Extended schools (simply put, a school which provides activities before and after the school day, for both pupils and where appropriate, the wider community) are being developed for every community across the country and Darlington is no exception. However, not every school will be 'extended' and those that are not will form part of 'clusters' sometimes joined to children's centres noted above.

Nationally, attention has been drawn to how important providing play is within the extended school remit, yet play is often poorly considered in the extended school 'offer', either at primary or senior level.

Further, there tends to be a reliance on 'more school', e.g. learning activities - which are not what extended schools are all about. And although homework clubs may be part of the school's extended programme, there needs to be undirected time for young people to socialise and to try new things.

At present all Darlington schools are involved in five extended schools clusters. Over the summer of 2007 locality workers will be employed in each cluster to support schools working with the whole community in their extended school provision.

Extended school provision is an opportunity to support play throughout the Borough and this should be recognized in the action plan.

## **6.7 The Cultural Strategy for Darlington: "Moving up: where culture comes to life"**

The Darlington Cultural Strategy provides the framework for the future role of cultural activities in relation to the vision of the Community Strategy to improve the quality of life for all residents.

Culture is defined as including the arts, sport, leisure, parks and open spaces, children's playgrounds and activities for teenagers, libraries and heritage as well as activities that acknowledge and celebrate different backgrounds. Therefore there are several overlaps with the play agenda.

The Play and Free-time Strategy will help to deliver some of the Cultural Strategy's aims in relation to parks and outdoor leisure facilities, and equally the action within the Cultural Strategy 'to attract funding to address short falls in informal play and community based facilities' will help to resource priorities in the Play and Free-time Strategy. This two way link should be recognised in the action plan.

## **6.8 Darlington Safeguarding Children Board Business Plan**

Child Protection activity is naturally a key part of any strategy that involves work with and for children and young people, including the Play and Free-time Strategy. The Darlington Safeguarding Children Board Business Plan is produced yearly, and reports on child protection activity and the work of Darlington's safeguarding children board. It also sets out objectives and work plans for the coming year.

The values and principles of the safeguarding children board must underpin all of the children and young people's strategies including this one. These values and principles are adopted from the Working Together guidance. They are:

Child protection in context – the child's need for protection from harm should be addressed along with any other welfare and developmental needs which the child may have.

Focus on outcomes for the child – the planning and evaluation of professional intervention should centre on the good, long-term outcomes for the child, in

terms of health development and educational achievement.

Skilled assessment – skilled, holistic assessment of the child's welfare and safety needs should underpin intervention at each stage and should follow the good practice guidance contained in the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families.

Working with children and families – all practice should aim to work constructively with the child's family and carers, in so far as this is of benefit to the child. Children should be listened to and their views taken into account.

Working across children's and adult services – where both adult and children's services are involved with a child's family, they should work together to promote the best outcomes for the child and the vulnerable adult.

## **6.9 Darlington Sport and Physical Activity Strategy 2007-2011 "More People, More Active, More Often"**

The Darlington Sport and Physical Activity Strategy has been produced as an overarching document to guide the development and provision of sport and physical activity in Darlington. The strategy directly supersedes the Sport and Recreation Strategy (2003-2008), in order to reflect the broader sport and physical activity agenda.

This is really positive for the play and free-time agenda – traditionally there are overlaps between the sport and play agendas because sports clubs and informal sport playing (kicking a football around in the

street for example) are high on the list of what children and young people like to do in their free time.

There is a danger in sports policy that only the formal side of sport is recognised in strategies, and that informal sport falls between the remits of sport and play strategies and therefore is not catered for. There is no danger of this happening in Darlington, these two strategies need to work closely together to provide the breadth of provision that young people require. This strategy is a strong platform from which this can happen.

#### **6.10 Darlington Crime, Disorder and Substance Misuse Reduction Strategy 2005-2008 and the Youth Justice Plan 2006/07**

The Darlington Crime, Disorder and Substance Misuse Reduction Strategy 2005-2008 is an over-arching strategy that sets out the priorities of the Darlington Community Safety Partnership. Play related priorities include developing activities that divert people from anti-social behaviour, and creating a physical and social environment where anti-social behaviour is less likely to arise in the first place.

One of the key strategies falling under the Crime, Disorder and Substance Misuse Reduction Strategy, The Youth Justice Plan, sets out how Darlington Youth Offending Service will deliver youth justice services in Darlington Borough. It covers all services for young people aged 10 to 17 who have committed or been alleged to have committed a crime, but also covers crime prevention.

The Youth Justice Plan Delivery plan is organised around Every Child Matters outcomes and the two areas where the Play and Free-time Strategy and Youth Justice Plan can work together are 'Make a positive contribution: engage in law abiding and positive behaviour in and out of school' and 'Be healthy: mentally and physically healthy'. There is some mention of encouraging positive activities in the Youth Justice Plan but there could be more. Linking the Play and Free-time Strategy with future plans could help both agendas in terms of allocating resources for mutual benefit (see action x.x)

#### **6.11 All Together Now: A Social Inclusion Strategy for Darlington**

Darlington Borough Council has adopted a Social Inclusion Strategy "All together now", which was published in 2005. The Strategy sets out what the Council and its partners can do to "improve the life chances of those at risk of disadvantage and discrimination" in Darlington. There are two parts of the strategy that relate specifically to children and young people and that mention play and free-time issues as a priority – an aim to promote healthy lifestyles and access to leisure opportunities for Looked After Children, and provision of high quality outdoor play spaces is a priority for children under the age of 5. Links to these priorities need to be recognised in the Play and Free-time Strategy action plan. Other areas of the strategy such as 'disabled people' and BME communities also include children, but there is no specific mention of play and free-time priorities. This is something that could be included in

future developments of this strategy if the Play and Free-time Strategy consultation highlights issues in these areas.

#### **6.12 Planning Policy Guidance note 17 (PPG17)**

Planning Policy Guidance 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation (PPG17)<sup>10</sup> states that councils, in conjunction with their partners, should adequately provide good quality open spaces, sport and recreation facilities for the whole community. The policy states:

Open spaces, sport and recreation all underpin people's quality of life. Well-designed and implemented planning policies for open space, sport and recreation are therefore fundamental to delivering broader Government objectives.

One of PPG17's aims is to improve the...

...social development of children of all ages through play, sporting activities and interaction with others.

Its requirements are to promote more sustainable development by ensuring that open space, sports and recreational facilities (particularly in urban areas) are easily accessible by walking and cycling and that more heavily used or intensive sports and recreational facilities are planned for locations in locations well served by public transport.

To deliver this, each local authority is strongly guided by PPG17 to produce an Open Space Strategy (OSS),

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<sup>10</sup> Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2002 PPG17 Guidance Note

based on a hierarchy of need from a thorough analysis of open space in the district.

#### **6.13 Darlington Borough Council Open Spaces Strategy 2007 - 2017**

The recently published Darlington Open Spaces Strategy 2007 – 2017 includes extensive consultation and detailed comments on the state of the parks and open spaces (including play spaces) in the Borough, and a list of actions in response to those comments. Open spaces, natural play and parks have been identified as important in the Play and Free-time Strategy consultation and therefore the links between the Play and Free-time Strategy and the open spaces strategy needs to be strong, and particularly any actions around play spaces need to be managed to avoid duplication and to make the most of these issues being prioritised in both strategies. The key issues in the two strategies are very closely aligned, particularly issues around the uneven access to open spaces around the town, youth provision as a priority, and the need to improve natural and informal spaces and play opportunities. This is really positive for the Play and Free-time Strategy.

#### **6.14 Darlington Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy**

In 2001 the Government published A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal. Its vision is to 'narrow the gap between poor neighbourhoods and the rest of the country, so that within 10-20 years no-one should be disadvantaged by where they live',

Neighbourhood renewal strategies are the resulting documents which target deprived 'neighbourhoods' in an effort to provide a holistic approach to the issues that face that neighbourhood. Funds are allocated to the targeted neighbourhoods by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

Darlington is not eligible for the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund but has taken the proactive view that the production of an NRS will help to provide a co-ordinated response to high levels of deprivation that exist within the Borough.

Within the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, eleven neighbourhoods have been identified as the most disadvantaged within Darlington, and a five year plan has been produced to tackle this deprivation.

Key issues that have been identified within the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy that the Play and Free-time Strategy will contribute to are:

Stimulating leisure activities – development of youth centres, and increase provision for young people

Promoting community safety – deal with issues of young people hanging around outside shops and off-licence.

Promoting inclusive communities – more involvement of young people in the community.

Provision for young people has been identified as a gap in the Play and Free-time Strategy, and by linking the Play and Free-time Strategy action plan to the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy more resources may be identified for play.

## 6.15 The Local Development Framework

Under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, councils are now obliged to draw up a local development framework or LDF to replace their old local spatial plans. This will be a 20 year framework for development. It is hard to underestimate just how important this could be (sitting alongside the OSS noted above) in delivering safe, challenging and walkable play environments.

The Darlington LDF is currently in development. The Local Development Scheme 2007 is a document that outlines how the council will produce the Local Development Framework over the next three years. This means that the play partnership will have a unique opportunity to be involved in the development of this framework and must campaign for play and free-time provision to be included as a priority in the framework.

This is a once in a generation opportunity to ensure that children and young people are properly involved in the design of their built environment, not just play sites. For example, young people skateboarding are often seen as a nuisance by many other residents or businesses, but were they ever asked about how their needs could be incorporated into new shopping centres or public spaces? The answer in Darlington (as per the rest of the country) is almost always no.

The play strategy also has a role to play here and should push the council to do more to engage children and young people, for example, regularly consulting, and where possible involving, young people through the Youth Assembly and broader youth consultation.

## 6.16 Summary

The *Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy* is informed by existing plans and strategies and highlights how it will deliver many of the actions set out in national and local level plans, without duplicating any existing or planned initiatives. Children and young people are a priority across the spectrum of policies in Darlington that provides a strong strategic platform on which the Play and Free-time Strategy can build.

While, this strategic approach is important, it is even more important to understand what the local social context is and where local play and free-time provision exists in Darlington, what the play/free-time needs are of children and young people and the views of parents and what barriers must be overcome in order to deliver these. The next sections address this.





What is the Darlington population?

### **6.17 Introduction**

In order to provide play opportunities to all children and young people effectively and fairly, it is important to understand the population of children and young people, their location in the Borough, their social background and the environment they are living in. This knowledge will help the council and the play partnership allocate the appropriate resources and play opportunities to children and young people.

### **6.18 Population**

Darlington's population is 98,600 with approximately 85,000 living in the urban area. There are 22,048 children and young people aged 0–18 years living in Darlington. There are 10,388 young people aged between 10 and 17 years. Darlington has an ageing population and a higher proportion of retired people. However, 22% of the population are aged 16 and under. A falling birth rate will mean that by 2011 the population aged 16 and under will fall to 18%. Appropriate and effective play provision in the Borough may help change this, for example, if more play schemes or safer parks are available for younger children, young adults are more likely to start a family and stay in the area.

The ethnic minority community population of Darlington is 2.1%, which is below the national average of 9.1%, although since 1991 the number of people from ethnic minority groups has increased by almost one and a half times. The three wards with the

highest proportion of ethnic minority groups are Northgate, Central and Park East.

Durham and Darlington Education Service for Travellers indicates that the total number of Gypsies and travellers resident in Darlington in any one year is around 1,800. Between September 2001 and July 2002, there were 481 children under 16. This means that Gypsies and travellers make up about 1.8% of Darlington's population.

The resident asylum seeker population is less than 0.05% of the Boroughs population, the main nationalities of people seeking asylum being Iraqi, Iranian, Palestinian and Congolese.

Children and young people from these groups may be experiencing cultural and/or very specific barriers to play and free, these will be addressed by the Play and Free-time Strategy.

### **6.19 Economy and Social Exclusion**

Darlington is ranked as the 91st most deprived local authority area in England, out of 354, in the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>11</sup>. This ranking excludes the Borough from access to Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. However, there are pockets of significant deprivation, with nine Lower Layer Super Output Areas (the level of detail below electoral wards

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<sup>11</sup> For this strategy the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) has been used to measure deprivation. IMD includes seven indicators of deprivation, not just financial, such as crime, health etc. and therefore gives a more rounded picture of the quality of life in a particular location.

introduced in the 2004 IMD) in the most deprived 10% nationally.

## 6.20 Housing

There are 42,311 households in Darlington of which approximately 6,050 (or 14.3%) are owned by the Local Authority, the lowest rate in Tees Valley. Over 71% of homes are owner-occupied and some 10% are privately rented. Unemployment within Darlington is relatively low (3.85%) compared to the rest of the Tees Valley (5.3%), yet is still slightly above the national rate (3.4%). In Darlington, 23% of children live in low-income households and 18% of children are eligible for free school meals. The number of single parent households in Darlington is 7.5% compared to 6.4% nationally.

Teenage conception rates in Darlington at 47.8 per 1000 females (2004) under 18 years old are higher than the national rate of 43 per 1000. However, Darlington, as the top performing North East Council, has seen a drop of 25.3% between 1998-2004. The Play and Free-time Strategy focuses on 0-19 year olds, in cases where teenagers have children there are play and free-time need for both the parents and the children, this has been addressed in the strategy through consultation with young mothers.

## 6.21 Summary

In general, the Borough of Darlington is reasonably well off however, there are pockets with significant deprivation ranked in the most deprived 10% nationally. This means that the needs of children and

young people will vary, whether they are from affluent background or from deprived areas. Furthermore, due to the ever changing make-up of the communities, the play needs of specific groups such as Gypsies and BME groups should also be addressed.

## 7 What play & free-time stuff is needed?



### 7.1 Introduction

The Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy must strive to increase the availability of quality play and free-time opportunities within the district. However, even with the best intentions this strategy cannot realistically achieve everything that it wants to immediately. Therefore, to ensure that the short term financial and organisational resources are targeted at the geographical areas and social groups most in need

of play improvement at the moment, a 'needs analysis' was undertaken.

This included identifying what existing research and consultation was available to avoid duplication and then filling any gaps with new research. Because little research into play needs existed previously in Darlington, a comprehensive consultation programme was undertaken (see the diagram) as well as an audit and mapping of existing provision.

Through focus groups, interviews, questionnaires and creative consultation sessions children, parents, young people as well as Play Partnership members were all asked what play/free-time opportunities currently existed, what was needed and what were the barriers to making change happen. Full details of the consultation are available in Appendix 2.

We also undertook a full audit and mapping of existing play provision from play schemes to parks and informal hang out areas. A full analysis of the mapping can be seen in Appendix 3. Together with the consultation this gives a picture of the current play situation in Darlington and what is needed.

These results were analysed and presented back to the Play Partnership for members to firstly to prioritise what they thought the greatest needs were and secondly to generate 'play project ideas' that could be used in the action plan (see section 11). These ideas will then be 'reality checked' with two groups of children, young people to make sure they would work in the real world. This feedback was integral to developing the projects detailed in the action plan.

## 7.2 Making play inclusive

It is impossible to generalise about children and young people with disabilities and special needs because their needs are so varied. However it is vital that if Darlington is going to provide play and free-time opportunities for all children and young people, that wherever possible those varied needs are addressed.

The research showed that there are some good specialist play opportunities in Darlington, such as the DASH playscheme and Sports Ability. These need to be supported so that they can continue to provide top quality play opportunities.

The area of need identified was to build capacity in mainstream provision to enable children and young people with disabilities and special needs to access more varied mainstream play and free-time opportunities.

In the consultation with parents, as well as raising issues around accessibility and quantity of provision, they also suggested straightforward ways that provision could be improved.

For example, they suggested that specific levels of need have to be catered for, rather than age – children with special needs often need to access play opportunities that are normally allocated to younger children, for example soft play, and bucket seats on swings for babies need to be bigger for older disabled children. Age restrictions on play provision can unnecessarily exclude children with disabilities and

special needs from activities that could give them huge benefits.

Staff working in mainstream provision must be provided with appropriate training that will enable them to support children and young people with disabilities in mainstream provision. Sports Ability was identified as a successful model for building mainstream capacity.

## 7.3 Making play stay for all ages

All children and young people aged 0 to 18 (and up to age 25 for young people with disabilities) need quality play and free-time opportunities.

The research shows that whilst there is some concern around the state of equipped play areas in areas such as Branksome because of vandalism and poor upkeep, the level of satisfaction with facilities for young children (up to age 8) is good. The town of Darlington is well served with Children's Centres, and there are plans for rural outreach which will extend the accessibility of those facilities.

However, there is a gap in provision for older children. This is reflected in parents consultation by parents who have teenage children and are concerned that they have nothing to do, and by parents of younger children who feel intimidated by teenagers who hang out in young children's play areas because there is no youth provision.

Youth clubs were mentioned as needed by young people and particularly young people with disabilities who need more supervised free-time opportunities.

## 7.4 Putting the right opportunities in the right places



### 7.4.1 Natural play

Consultation with primary school aged children showed that children like to play outdoors, particularly natural play activities like making dens and climbing trees, and kicking a football about in the local parks.

*"A park with bigger swings and more adventurous would be good as it's all for little kids"*

*"It would be good to have a play area in woods or something with a treehouse and stuff"*

## Darlington Primary School Consultation

The GIS mapping shows a lack of natural spaces, which is a concern considering that natural play featured highly on the list of things that children aged 5 to 11 like to do.

### 7.4.2 Parks and equipped play areas

There are a range of issues that impact on how well children and young people use their local parks and equipped play areas. These include age appropriateness and accessibility of equipment, presence of older children and levels of supervision.

*"There's a new park near Middleham Road, it's a bit boring. There's only two swings and a tiny slide for little kids."*

#### From Darlington Primary School consultation

The children aged between 11 and 12 were the most likely to report that they did not go to play areas because there was older children there compared to those aged 13 to 14 and those aged 15 to 16; 56 per cent to 42 per cent and 22 per cent.

Furthermore, the younger children were the most likely to report that they felt there was not enough supervision in play areas (39 per cent) compared to those aged between 13 and 14 (17 per cent) and those aged 15 and 16 (19 per cent).

In comparison, the young people aged between 15 and 16 were the most likely to report they felt there was too much supervision in play areas (47 per cent),

than those aged between 13 and 14 (37 per cent) and those aged between 10 and 12 (18 per cent).

Parents voiced concern about the quality and condition of outdoor play spaces, that many were inaccessible for children with disabilities because of the types of equipment provided, and that equipped play areas were broken and full of dangerous litter such as broken glass. Making outdoor play provision accessible needs to be a priority.

The *Darlington Open Space Strategy 2007-2017* was recently published and contains detailed consultation and analysis of the issues that we have raised here, and can be used to inform any developments of play and free-time opportunities in parks and green spaces. It is important that the natural assets of parks such as trees and water features are considered as part of the play agenda, as well as fixed play equipment.

#### **7.4.3 Kickabout areas**

*“Lads like football but there’s nowhere to play. They play in the garden, they’re not allowed to play in the streets. They don’t really play out much, they get bored and soon come home to play games in their bedrooms branksome parents”*

**Parent, Branksome**

Informal sports that young people can play in local areas near their homes are popular, and a lack of places where they can play in groups means that young people often end up at home on their own, losing out on important social development, and exercise.

#### **7.4.4 Where children and young people spend their time**

Across all the consultation when asked about what and where children and young people played, the theme that emerged was that most play happens ‘on the doorstep’, within walking distance of homes.

The mapping highlights some places where there are gaps in available doorstep provision, and these gaps should be considered as priorities for the Play and Free-time Strategy.

Doorstep play is an important way for children and young people to build social networks and independence, and can help to build community cohesion.

*“I have no friends from school on my estate, but I went out on street and this girl asked me if I wanted to be her friend, so I said yes and I play with her now”*

**From Darlington Primary School Consultation**

Home Zones will be a key initiative that will improve doorstep play opportunities, and need to be developed in conjunction with the play agenda.

#### **7.4.5 Travelling to play spaces**

In the consultation with parents, concern about distances to walk and frequency/accessibility of buses suggests that car use is low within the town of Darlington and therefore location of facilities in relation to public transport needs to be addressed.



Young people said that they are willing to travel to do activities. However, the place that young people most wanted to hang out was on the estate and in town – this is because these are the easiest places to get to – around where they live can be accessed on foot, and the city centre can be easily reached by public transport.

Most primary school children seem to walk to school and walk to play facilities. However, children with disabilities are more likely to be dependant on going by car to where they play, and less likely to go out and play on their own, so doorstep provision is less important.

This means that the needs of children and young people in terms of proximity to provision and transport are varied – juniors and under fives who are dependant on parents taking them to places are more likely to walk with their parents or carers to play provision.

Young people are willing to travel, but are restricted to where can be easily reached on public transport.

Children with disabilities are more likely to be dependant on cars, so would need the additional consideration of parking.

#### **7.4.6 Play in rural areas**

The mapping and the response from parish councils showed that there was very little play provision mapped in rural areas. Census data shows that there are children and young people living in rural areas, so more work needs to be done to find out what opportunities are available for these children and how

their needs can be met. This strategy must acknowledge that the Borough contains both rural and urban wards, and that all children across the Borough must have equal opportunities to access quality play provision.

#### **7.5 Making play safe AND adventurous**

As already established in this document, taking risks in play and free-time is important for children and young people's development.

Parents of children with disabilities said that for their children a balance between risk and familiarity is important – children need to experience risk in play so that they can build up confidence and independence, but familiarity and continuity of provision is important so that they feel secure.

The research showed that children and young people like doing 'risky' activities like climbing trees and adventure play.

However, despite both children and their parents acknowledging the importance of taking risks whilst playing, partner interviews showed that providers are reluctant to provide 'risky' play provision because of fear of litigation. There is a gap here between what children and parents want, and what providers are willing to put in place.

#### **7.6 Building community support for play**

Whilst throughout this strategy we have emphasized the importance of children and young people leading their own play and free time – making their own

choices, and being part of the creation of new opportunities – in contemporary British society adults are often the gatekeepers to play and free-time, and can be the obstacles to play and free-time opportunities.

Consultation with primary school children showed that they are aware that local residents have negative attitudes towards them playing near their homes, and this is a barrier to them playing and to building good relationships within the community.

*“Sometimes where we play on the street neighbours tell us off and bang on the windows”*

#### **Darlington Primary School Consultation**

This issue was also highlighted in partner interviews which said people often unfairly associate young people ‘hanging out’ with anti social behaviour, and this can lead to local residents blocking plans for youth provision near their homes, and to complaints about young people ‘hanging out’ in public spaces.

Work needs to be done to improve everybody’s understanding of the value of play, and the importance of enabling all children and young people to play and ‘hang out’ in safe, accessible, visible spaces within the community.

### **7.7 Information and support for parents of children with disabilities and special needs**

There is a need for information and support for parents so that they know what is available and feel confident in enabling their children to go out and play.

In the DAD focus group, parents of children with disabilities said that general attitudes towards children with disabilities affected their confidence to take their children to new places and to take their children to mainstream provision. They said that parents need support to gain confidence to go to new places.

The focus group also highlighted that information is needed for parents and carers of ALL children with disabilities, not just those who are statemented or registered with social services, so that they know about the opportunities that are available. Parents need support and encouragement to help their children to try new things.

### **7.8 What do children and young people want?**

#### **7.8.1 Primary school aged children**

The emphasis for younger children (primary school age) was on informal ‘playful’ sports activities such as swimming and trampolining, adventurous natural play such as building dens and climbing trees, and after school clubs.

#### **7.8.2 Young people**

Young people said that they wanted more activities to do and more safe places to go. The emphasis for young people was on social activities (‘hanging out’, spending time with friends), and on having activities that they can do such as creative technology, making music and using the internet.

There is a clear gap in the play/free-time opportunities that are available for children and young

people and the play/free-time they actually do. For example, when asked in the school questionnaire:

What do you regularly do in your free time at the moment?" (top five answers were):

1. Socialising with friends
2. Using the internet
3. Listening to music
4. Chilling out your own
5. Playing computer games

However, the free-time activities the children and young people were most likely to want to be involved with in the future were:

1. Creating music
2. Going to activity clubs
3. Creative arts activities
4. Sport outside of school
5. Water based activities

### 7.8.3 Key themes:

#### *Places to go*

Children and young people want more places that they can go to spend time with their friends, take part in informal games such as football, and not be stopped by local residents.

#### *Natural play*

Younger children want to be able to make dens, climb trees and explore natural areas.

#### *Informal activities*

Children and young people like activities – arts, music, computers, football and other sports, learning new things. It is important that when activities are provided for children and young people, that they are done in an environment where they can make their own choices about what they do and when they do it.

#### *Creative play*

Constructive and creative play such as creating art and music were priorities identified by young people and parents, and are important for development, particularly for children with disabilities and special needs.

## 7.9 Summary

Access for all – all children and young people should be able to access quality play and free-time opportunities and should not be disadvantaged by where they live, their cultural or socio-economic background, their disabilities and special needs, or their age.

Attitudes and awareness – Negative attitudes of adults towards children and young people and their free-time activities often prevents quality play provision from being located in the communities where it is needed. Campaigning for and promoting positive messages about young people and their play and free-time needs to the wider community is a priority.

Youth provision – Access to quality play and free-time opportunities for all age groups from 0 to 18 years is

a priority, but at the time of writing the strategy the gap in provision that has been identified is for older children and teenagers, therefore the short term priority for projects is to provide more opportunities for young people.

The following chapter will link the findings of the research to the action plan, so that this Play and Free-time Strategy can effectively meet the needs of Darlington's children and young people.

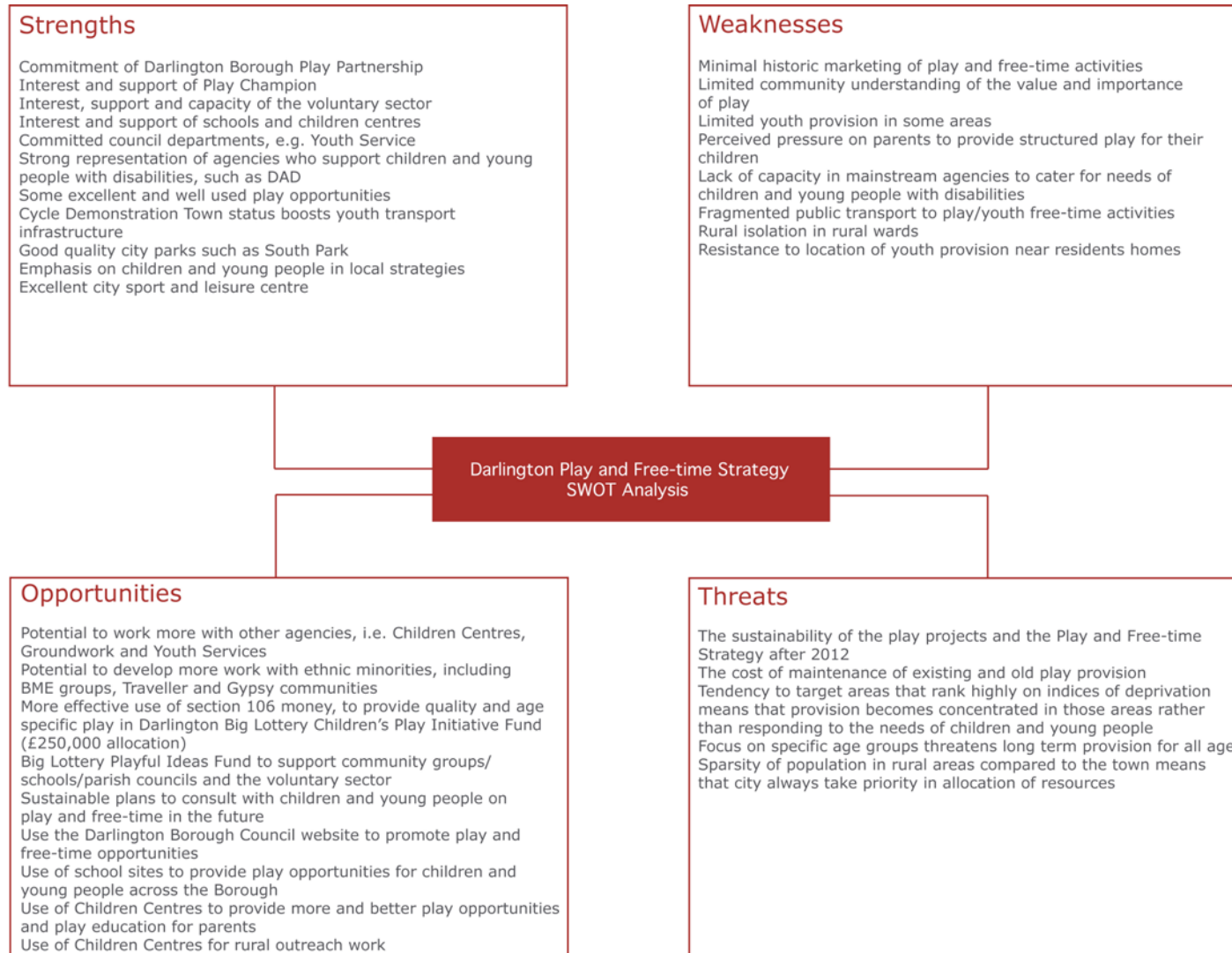
## **8 What are the play and free-time priorities?**

To link the findings of all the previous sections to the action plan, a SWOT analysis was undertaken. The

SWOT shows in a snapshot, what the **strengths** of current play and free-time activities in Darlington are (and so these can be maintained or expanded); what **weaknesses** characterise current provision (so, where possible they can be addressed in the action plan); the **opportunities**, which can be seized by the Play Partnership partners and the wider community (e.g. to put in funding bids, to change the way we do things now) and the **threats**, which the action plan must (and does) address if the Play and Free-Time Strategy is to be sustainable.

This will help Darlington to maximise the resources already available by clearly showing what is working well at the moment, and where the opportunities are to address weaknesses and improve provision.

**Figure 3: Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT to play in Darlington)**



## **9 Who is the Play and Free-time Strategy contact?**

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## 10 The Darlington Play and Free-time Action Plan

What are the play and free-time ACTIONS?

These actions have been developed by the Darlington Play Partnership in consultation with young people, parents and stakeholders.

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
1. Valuing play								
1.0 Play Partnership	The Darlington Play Partnership (the key partners from the current Play Partnership) will meet four times a year, for the next five years to review progress made by the partners in delivering the Darlington Play and Free-time Strategy. When appropriate, young people will be involved in contributing to play partnership meetings.	The Play Partnership	N/A	N/A	Minutes posted on Council websites and to all key partners and those parties involved in play provision.	2007 - 12	Very High	Play Partner Officer Time. D.B.C Officer Time and Internal resources
1.1 Play Champion	Darlington Borough Council's portfolio	Children's Services	N/A	D.B.C Corporate	Play and Free Time Strategy	Achieved and	High	D.B.C Councillor

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
	<p>holder for Children's Services to be appointed as 'Play Champion'.</p> <p>Play Champion to ensure that strategic links are maintained between the Play and free-time strategy and other key strategies, such as the Children and Young Peoples Plan, The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and the Open Spaces Strategy.</p>			<p>Strategy/D .B.C Cultural Strategy/</p> <p>Community Strategy</p>	adopted as D.B.C Policy	Ongoing to 2012		time
1.2 Play Network	Play partnership to work closely with the newly formed Play network to co-ordinate play provision in line with Play and Free-time Strategy priorities.	TBA						
1.3 Play	The Play	TBA	N/A	D.B.C	Appropriate	September	Very	DBC Officer

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
Development Officer	Development Officer will identify cross-cutting opportunities for improving play within the council, support the Play Partnership to deliver the Play and Free-time Strategy and inform the Play Champion of progress against the strategy.			Corporate Strategy/ Community Strategy	Officer Job Description rewritten to include play and free time strategy responsibilities	2007	High	Time
1.4 Delivering play	<p>Darlington Borough Council to support the local voluntary and community sector to build capacity to deliver play.</p> <p>Work closely with other organisations delivering play, such as Groundwork, to ensure a coordinated approach to play delivery that</p>	TBA						

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	targets areas of need as identified in the Play and Free-time Strategy.							
1.5 Marketing Play and Free time	<p>Develop a simple Darlington Play and Free-time Marketing and Communications Plan including:</p> <p>Play and Free-time Strategy launch event . Also use other events to communicate the play message.</p> <p>Change 'No ball games' signs to 'Please play here' signs in public playable spaces.</p> <p>Ensure, where appropriate, play and free-time activities delivered under the Play and Free-time Strategy (e.g. Play Rangers) have a dedicated</p>	DBC Communications Unit and Leisure Arts Marketing Team	<p>Communications Unit</p> <p>L&amp; A Marketing Team</p> <p>Play Rangers Lead</p> <p>New Play Development Officer</p>	<p>D.B.C Corporate Strategy</p> <p>D.B.C Marketing Plan</p>	<p>Darlington Play and Free time Plan written</p> <p>Website Active</p> <p>More Parents and Young People informed about play opportunities</p>	Dec 2007 - 2012	High	DBC Officer Time

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
	marketing approach to maximise participation.							
1.6 Consultation and engagement	<p>Ensure, where appropriate, children, parents, young people and vitally, the local community, are always involved in the development and implementation of physical play spaces opportunities.</p> <p>Ensure that the youth assembly in Darlington routinely considers play / free-time on their agenda (feedback to Play Partnership).</p> <p>Play Partnership to consult quarterly with school councils through ESCo's (Extended Schools</p>	D.B.C Development Officer	<p>Play Partnership</p> <p>Children's Trust</p> <p>Youth Council</p> <p>Open Space Team</p>	<p>Children and Young People's plan, Local Development Framework</p>	<p>Play Developments are more successful because they are what people want</p> <p>Youth Councils regularly feedback to the Play Partnership</p> <p>All high schools regularly consulted and actions (Where appropriate and possible) delivered</p>	2007 -2012	High	DBC Planning and Parks Department Officer time and recourses

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
	Coordinators) on play and free-time in the borough and where possible act upon feedback.							
2. Including all in play								
2.0 Transport	<p>Address transport provision for children and young people with disabilities.</p> <p>Address transport provision for children living in Darlington's rural wards.</p> <p>Link with Cycle Demonstration Town Initiative to promote cycling as a means of accessing play provision. Ensure that new play provision has facilities for storing</p>	TBA	<p>Transport Department</p> <p>Traffic Management and Road Safety</p> <p>Cycle Demonstration Town Initiative</p>	<p>Accessibility Plan</p> <p>Town on the move</p> <p>Cycling Strategy</p>	<p>Improved transport provision for young people</p> <p>Deliver Cycling as a means of connecting and young people with play</p>		High	Officer Time and???



Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
	bicycles securely.							
2.1 Open Space Strategy	<p>Darlington Borough Council to ensure that open spaces under the Darlington Open Space Strategy (OSS) are developed in line with Play and free-time strategy recommendations.</p> <p>In negotiations with developers, ambitious and creative (not necessarily expensive) play / free-time facilities should be delivered as part of Section 106 agreements with developers (with a particularly focus on older children who are often not provided for by S106 agreements).</p>	DBC Planning & DBC Environmental Services	<p>DBC Parks Consultants</p> <p>Private Developers and registered social landlords</p>	<p>DBC Corporate Strategy</p> <p>DBC Local Development Strategy</p> <p>DBC Open Spaces Strategy</p>	<p>Open Space Strategy Achieved</p> <p>New Play provision provided as part of section 106 agreements</p>	<p>Complete</p> <p>Ongoing</p>	<p>N/A</p> <p>Medium</p>	<p>DBC Officer Time</p> <p>DBC Officer Time</p>

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
2.2 Local Development Framework	<p>Ensure that play and free-time priorities are embedded in the new Local Development Framework and that this is done with youth participation in decision making.</p> <p>Ensure in larger developments, children, young people and their parents are properly involved in the design and type of play and free-time equipment provided by developers</p>	DBC Planning Department	Private Developers and registered Social Landlords	DBC Corporate Strategy, Local Development Framework, Community Strategy	Involvement of Young People in Darlington's built environment	On-going	Medium	DBC Officer Time
2.3 Council commitment to inclusion	Play Partnership to lobby Darlington Borough Council to sign up to the Kids Inclusion Framework for Local Authorities.	Play Development Officer	Play Partnership  D.A.D  Kids (national disability)	DBC Corporate Plan  Social Inclusion Strategy	Sign up to Kids Inclusion Framework	2008	High	

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
			charity ) or similar					
2.4 Inclusion and access	Deliver a training programme for all those involved in delivering the Play and Free-time Strategy (including Play Partnership and volunteers) on issues of disability and play inclusion, in line with priorities of the Social Inclusion Strategy.	Play Partnership	Play Partnership	Play Partnership Kids Active	Social Inclusion Strategy	January 2008 and Ongoing	High	
3. Play in the real world								
3.0 Resourcing play	Where play and free-time provision has been identified as a priority, seek resource opportunities in other strategies, such as Cultural Strategy and Open Spaces Strategy.							

<b>Action</b>	<b>What is the action?</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Partners</b>	<b>Links</b>	<b>Milestones</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Resources</b>
3.1 Training young people	Training younger people for a 'young leaders award' with the prospect of becoming a 'play ranger'.  Provide volunteering opportunities for young people to work with young children.	TBA						
3.2 Extended schools	Darlington Play Partnership to lobby extended schools coordinator to ensure Play and Free-time Strategy outcomes are used to develop play as a core offer of extended schools programme.	Play Partnership	Darlington Borough Council	Darlington Borough Council Extended Schools Strategy	All extended schools in Darlington offer quality play facilities out of hours	December 2008	Medium	DBC Officer Time  Darlington Borough Council Extended Schools Budget
3.3 Children's Centres	Ensure that further development of Children's Centres (particularly Rural Outreach) prioritises good	Darlington Borough Council  Children's Centre	Play Partnership	Community Strategy	Children's Centres provide quality play provision		Medium	Darlington Borough Council Officer Time  Cost to be within

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	<p>quality play provision, and that outdoor facilities around Children's Centres are providing quality outdoor play for age ranges beyond the &lt;5 remit.</p> <p>Ensure that through the Children's Centres, parents are educated about the value of play and the need for appropriate play.</p>							existing budget
3.4 Parks and playable spaces	<p>Lobby for increased access to gated parks and play spaces.</p> <p>Work with local friends groups to support play in parks, and to increase ownership and responsibility for maintenance of parks within the</p>							

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	community.  Identify, map and promote Brownfield sites available for play.							
3.5 play project								
Denes MUGA	There is LAA funding to focus in improving facilities within the Denes for Children and Young People.  From the consultation so far key issues are to significantly improve the existing provision and to consider providing an	Groundworks	The Friends and Darlington Borough Council			Consultation is ongoing, develop proposals by mid September and the aim would be to have a new play area complete before Easter 2008	High	50K

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	<p>additional small play area at the Cockerton end (Tennis Courts). Plus to consider the needs of young people</p> <p>There is a great opportunity to remove the existing play facility and provide a facility that meets the needs of children and families that is fun and challenging.</p> <p>The feasibility study will consider the needs of young people, though further work is needed to capture their ideas and this work is starting now.</p>							

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
	<p>Consultation is ongoing, would like to develop proposals by mid September and the aim would be to have a new play area complete before Easter 2008.</p>							
<p>Lascelles MUGA</p>	<p>Lascelles</p> <p>DBC and Groundwork are currently working with the Lascelles Partnership to enhance a significant piece of open space that currently only has a toddler play area on it.</p> <p>From consultation with children and young people they</p>	<p>Groundworks</p>	<p>The Friends and Darlington Borough Council</p>				<p>High</p>	<p>50k</p>



Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
	<p>would like so see better facilities. Their main priority is a kick wall/half MUGA as they have nothing like this that is accessible and free at the moment. Linked to this it would ideal to develop a seating area for young people that they design (equivalent of a youth shelter).</p> <p>This would also provide the surface for mobile skate equipment if required. There is also the alternative to provide low level skate equipment on site at Lascelles.</p> <p>The whole site is also beginning</p>							

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	looked at from a design point of view to provide a quality piece of open space within this estate that can meet the needs of residents of all ages.							
Heighington MUGA	To install a MUGA at Heighnton on the newly restored sports field area with an intention of delivering a variety of sports for young people in the area	The Parish Council	D.B.C					30k
"The Living Room" - Youth Shelter	To Create meeting points in identified park spaces. "Living Rooms" will be designed Youth Shelters outside in parks and public spaces designed by young people. To provide something that isn't just	Youth Service						60k

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	<p>another shelter.            From conversations with young people – The concept is to replace park benches with sofas! This is designed to make young people feel comfortable and enable them to socialize in a safe area.</p>							
<p>Community Play Opportunities for 5-13 year olds</p>	<p>Following successful pilot play schemes within community based hubs at both Redhall and Skerne Park ran by the community, it has been identified that these types of provision are both extremely well supported and valued and successful on giving continued support filling the gap between SureStart age categories 0-5</p>							

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	years and Youth Service and Connexions support of 13-19 years. It is intended that these models will be used to influence new projects that will develop these opportunities that can be rolled out to other areas of the town.							
4. Measuring play success								
4.0 Performance management	Performance management will be monitored through the Play Partnership and both the Council's Lifelong Learning and Environment Scrutiny committees.							
4.1 Evaluation	Evaluate whether over the life of the strategy, the value of, and	Play Partnership	Schools Research Consultant	DBC Corporate Strategy/ Cultural	Reduction in barriers to play and free time	Dec 2011 (to inform new strategy for	High	

Action	What is the action?	Lead	Partners	Links	Milestones	Timescale	Priority	Resources
	<p>participation in, play has been raised in Darlington and whether children, young people and parents are receiving more play outcomes. Conduct a survey of 200 parents and repeat the school survey undertaken in 2007 with Darlington schools.</p>		s	Strategy/ Community Strategy	<p>recorded. A closer fit between what young people have asked for in 2007 and what is available in 2011. Parents notice improved play opportunities by 2011.</p>	2012)		