



An Evaluation of the Outdoor Play Provision at Sure Start Noddle Hill

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1. Introduction

Each Sure Start programme aims to meet five Objectives that have been set out by Government Office and administered through the Sure Start Unit. The objectives are as follows:

- Improving the ability to learn
- Improving social and emotional development
- Improving health
- Strengthening families and communities
- Improving the availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare

In working towards achieving some of these objectives, Sure Start Noddle Hill has employed a part time Outdoor play worker within the Community Development team. As part of a wider programme of evaluation, Sure Start Noddle Hill was keen to explore the impact that such a role may have upon these objectives. An independent study was therefore commissioned in order to examine and report upon the contribution of outdoor within Sure Start Noddle Hill.

This report commences with an overview of outdoor play, exploring the rationale for the inclusion of risk-managed activities within services for families with young children. The actual delivery of outdoor play is studied in detail along with some exploration of the role of the Outdoor Play worker. The report also focuses on the take-up of the provision and the potential benefits that it has brought to parents, children and the wider local Sure Start programme. The views of all stakeholders are presented and in particular the views of parents are illustrated through the presentation of a case study. Attention has also been paid towards the financial implications of the outdoor play provision by determining to some extent the cost effectiveness of the provision. Finally, the report concludes with an overall summary of the strengths of the provision and makes a number of recommendations that may be considered when

planning the future development of the outdoor play provision.

2. Background – Understanding Outdoor Play

To fully understand the role of the Outdoor Play Worker we must first understand Outdoor play.

Definitions and Benefits of Outdoor Play

Children of all ages play as part of the developmental and learning process. Current literature describes play as involving not only physical elements, but also cognitive, imaginative, emotional and social aspects. A review report by the Department of Media, Culture and Sport¹, indicates that play allows children the opportunity to explore, discover, experiment, understand, fail and succeed, without direction from adults. Children follow their own ideas in their own ways in play, and thereby develop as individuals, as well as members of the community.

Outdoor play has special developmental and therapeutic value in providing “*freedom, large-scale physical activity and a range of challenges for children*”². Outdoor play can occur in natural or man-made environments and the more diverse the surroundings, the greater the range of learning and developmental opportunities.

There is widespread acceptance that outdoor play has positive effects on the individual child, and also society in general. Some of these benefits are listed in a report by the National Playing Fields Association entitled *Best Play*³ and include:

- opportunities to enjoy freedom, and exercise choice and control over their actions
- opportunities for testing boundaries and exploring risk

¹ Department for Culture Media and Sport (2001) *Getting Serious about Play. A Review of Children’s Play*. London

² National Playing Fields Association (2000) *Best Play: What Play Provision Should Do for Children* p.14. Available from: <http://www.ncb.org.uk/resources/bestplay.pdf> [Accessed on 19/11/04]

³ National Playing Fields Association (2000) *Best Play: What Play Provision Should Do for Children*. Available from: <http://www.ncb.org.uk/resources/bestplay.pdf> [Accessed on 19/11/04]

- opportunities for a very wide range of physical, social and intellectual experiences
- Fosters independence and self-esteem
- Develops children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction
- Supports the child's well-being, healthy growth and development
- Increases children's knowledge and understanding
- Promotes children's creativity and capacity to learn

Best Play also explains that children who are deprived of opportunities for outdoor play could develop poorer abilities in motor tasks, lower levels of physical activity, poorer abilities to deal with stressful or traumatic situations and events, poorer abilities to assess and manage risk, and poorer social skills leading to difficulties in negotiating social situations such as dealing with conflict and cultural difference.

Context

There is a lack of stimulating, safe play opportunities in the general environment and according to the aforementioned report by the Department for Culture Media and Sport, parents believe that children now spend too much time watching television or playing on computers, and would like them to get more exercise. However, fears about safety, such as strangers, traffic and bullying, lead many parents to restrict their children's freedom to play and go out on their own. A good practice guide published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister⁴ echoes this and describes other influences that can limit access to public open space and outdoor play opportunities. These influences include commercial interests such as targeted marketing and advertising campaigns to engage children in things like computer-based activities, religious and cultural beliefs, and the educational curriculum which places more emphasis on indoor rather than outdoor education.

⁴ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003) *Developing Accessible Play Space: A Good Practice Guide*. London

For many years, play provision has been given a low priority with play projects being neglected, or having insufficient resources to respond to changing local needs and circumstances. However, the last few years have seen an increase in recognition of the need for more and better maintained public open space, play facilities and opportunities. The good practice guide also refers to a MORI survey for the Audit Commission conducted in 2001, which showed that “activities for young people” was ranked by adults as the most requested improvement in local services.

Public play provision aims to provide spaces and settings to complement the home and school environments, where children can enjoy the benefits of outdoor play. Play services and spaces can offer variety, comfort and equal opportunity, where the home environment is poor or there is a restricted range of stimuli. *Best Play* therefore suggests that play provision can be used as a starting point for addressing poverty, deprivation and social exclusion. Ideally it should offer children as much choice, control and freedom as possible within reasonable boundaries.

By ensuring access for children and young people to good outdoor space, society will be responding to their stated needs and wishes, supporting their healthy development; contributing to feelings of inclusion; and promoting safer, more cohesive communities. The Children’s Play Council⁵ proposes that if this access to outdoor space is not provided for, children and young people are likely to seek out other places and activities at much greater danger to themselves and others.

The Need to Consider Risk Management in Play Provision

In any human activity there is an element of risk, and almost any environment contains hazards or sources of harm. In addition to this, all children need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, have new experiences, and develop capacities.

⁵ Children’s Play Council (2002) *More than Swings and Roundabouts: Planning for Outdoor Play*. National Children’s Bureau. London.

A balance has to be found between accepting that all children face a degree of risk in public play spaces, and the increasing fears of litigation in the current climate. There is also the need to understand that children benefit from some exposure to risk. Play provision therefore must aim to achieve a balance between the need to offer risk, and the need to keep children safe from harm.

The Children's Play Council position statement⁶ confirms this with the following:

"Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this, play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury."

Referring to this statement, and in the same document, the Health and Safety Executive is stated as saying:

"We must not lose sight of the important developmental role of play for children in the pursuit of the unachievable goal of absolute safety. It makes clear that the safety must be considered at all stages of play provision but that, inevitably, there will be risk of injury when children play, as there is risk of injury in life generally. The important message is though that there must be freedom from unacceptable risk of life-threatening or permanently disabling injury in play." (pg1)

Issues for Play Providers and Recommendations for Risk Management

Due to the fear of litigation, many play providers are focusing on minimising the risk of injury, and are thereby stopping children from enjoying a healthy range of play opportunities, causing potential damage to their development.

⁶ Children's Play Council (2003) *Managing Risk in Play Provision: A Position Statement*. Available from: <http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/adventure/manage.htm> [Accessed on 19/11/04]

However, there is evidence that playing in play provision is a comparatively low risk activity for children and The Play Safety Forum⁷ declares that less than 2% of childhood accidents treated by hospitals each year, involve playground equipment.

It has been recommended that all those involved in play provision should give close consideration to the issues raised regarding safety in play, and that this would be done most effectively by a review of policies and procedures.

Guidelines for good practice are set out by the Children's Play Council and clear well-understood policies, together with procedures that put these policies into practice, are identified as the key to good practice in risk management. These policies should give guidance but also recognize the need for professional judgment in setting the balance between safety and other goals.

Judgments about the acceptability of risk are made on the basis of risk assessment, which considers the likelihood of coming to harm, the severity of that harm and the benefits, rewards or outcomes of that activity. It is the job of all those responsible for children at play to assess and manage the level of risk so that children have chance to test and develop their abilities without exposing them to unacceptable risks.

Best Play indicates that there will be differences between sites which are permanently staffed by skilled play workers, and sites without supervision. In the former, play workers are able to use their judgment about when and how to intervene to prevent harm to children, without unnecessarily disrupting their play. They are able to maintain the site and equipment, and to interpret children's behaviour supporting the creation of more exciting and attractive play environments, and allowing greater scope for risk taking. In unsupervised settings the design of the equipment is essential for risk management, and The Children's Play Council position statement suggests one approach of making the risks as apparent as possible to children, and avoiding hidden

⁷ Children's Play Council (2003) *Managing Risk in Play Provision: A Position Statement*. Available from: <http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/adventure/manage.htm> [Accessed on 19/11/04]

risks for example equipment that could cause entrapment. Manufacturers also need to be vigilant about equipment design and installation, and pay close attention to compliance with safety standards.

In summary, judgements on aspects of risk management should be based on current best practice, social attitudes, and expert opinion, and should also take into account the concerns of the parents. Clear policies should be stated in policy documents of the play provider, and understood by all stakeholders. However, above all, as stated by The Children's Play Council⁸ *"it must be remembered that play provision is first and foremost for children. If it is not attractive and exciting to them, it will fail, no matter how "safe" it is"*.

⁸ Children's Play Council (2004) *Policy Positions. Risk and Challenge in Children's Play*. February 2004.

3. Methodology

In order to capture a variety of data a number of research methods have been employed for this evaluation study. To guide the process, a general community based framework for evaluation⁹ was used which considers:

INPUTS – What resources have been made available?

PROCESSES – What has been done to achieve outputs?

OUTPUTS – Who accessed the service?

OUTCOMES – What happened as a result?

This framework has been applied by undertaking the following steps:

- **Addressing Monitoring Data**

Monitoring data was used to identify both the inputs and outputs of the provision

- **Direct Observation**

Evaluators attended three of the Outdoor Play sessions supported by the Family Play and Learn workers

- **Face to Face interviews**

The evaluators endeavoured to speak to all stakeholders by conducting face-to-face interviews, with the aim of identifying the following:

- Overall perceptions of the Outdoor Play provision
- What impact the provision has had on users
- What impact the provision had on Sure Start Targets and Objectives
- What improvements if any could be made

⁹ Barr,A.and Hashagen,S.(2000) *ABCD, A Framework for Evaluating Community Development*. Community Development Foundation Publications, London.

This was achieved by attending Outdoor Play sessions, where the evaluators spoke to parents and workers individually. The evaluators also held face to face interviews with the Sure Start Play and Learn Co-ordinator.

4. Staffing of the Outdoor Play Provision

The provision was established to jointly develop, with parents/carers and local agencies, outdoor play opportunities and experiences within the Sure Start Noddle Hill area that respond to identified play needs for children up to and including the age of eight years.

The provision is staffed by one part time worker, who is contracted to work 20 hours per week. The Play and Learn Co-ordinator oversees the worker on a daily basis.

The worker's main roles and responsibilities include:

- To contribute to identifying need for outdoor play and organising responsive play activities for children under eight years and their families
- To encourage and develop the use and respect of these areas and other outdoor play initiatives
- To develop positive relationships with children and their families which support local involvement in and respect for the outdoor environment
- To deliver, evaluate, and plan age-appropriate play activities which make best use of the outdoor play environment
- To produce and encourage the use of appropriate guidelines for outdoor play, having regard for health and safety and child protection legislation
- To be an active member of the outdoor play sub-group, providing relevant information and report to inform future development
- To work alongside parents, schools, health professionals, Sure Start staff and others including Sports development, Urban Park Ranger Service, Hull DOC, and the Youth Service to develop a programme of outdoor play activities for the under eights

- To maintain an out-of-doors presence in the local community, encouraging and supporting access to local play spaces, minimising vandalism and reducing crime
- Work in partnership with the Sure Start team to identify, plan and prepare additional funding opportunities to enable sustained development of the outdoor play project

5. Relevant Sure Start Targets and Objectives

In order to maintain an effective service, it is important to consider how the Outdoor Play Provision relates to Sure Start targets and objectives. The following targets and objectives are relevant to the outdoor play provision and each section describes the contribution that the outdoor play provision has made towards achieving them:

Objective 1. Improving Social and Emotional Development

Target PSA – Increase the proportion of babies and children aged 0-5 years with normal levels of personal social and emotional development for their age.

Response: The worker has developed the outdoor play area at Lemon Tree (the main Sure Start Noddle Hill building). This has enabled the worker to deliver a range of regular all weather outdoor play sessions that started the first week in August 2004. The parents and children participate in stimulating physical activities, using flexible outdoor play equipment that can be utilised by parents and children to play a range of different games. This encourages both parents and children to interact together whilst using their own imagination, thus promoting personal social and emotional development.

The worker has worked across the Sure Start teams to assist in delivering the outdoor summer activities programme. This encourages parents and children to come together to participate in a range of stimulating activities that not only give parents and children opportunities to develop new skills, but present opportunities for parents and children to socialise with one another thus building new friendships and relationships.

Objective 2. Improving Health

Target SDA 11- Information and guidance on breast-feeding, nutrition, hygiene and safety available to all families with young children in Sure Start local programme areas.

Response: The delivery of outdoor play sessions will allow children to participate in adventure activities outside in the fresh air, which will promote play and exercise. This is coupled with cross-team delivery of activities such as the Mini Olympics which was an event delivered by the Outdoor Play worker, Healthy Eating worker and the Arts development worker, providing families with a joined-up approach to meet their needs.

Objective 3. Improving the ability to learn

Target PSA 3a – Increase the proportion of children having levels of communication language and literacy at the end of foundation stage.

Target PSA3b – An increase in the proportion of young children with satisfactory speech and language development at the age of 2 years.

Response: In addition to developing the outdoor play area at Lemon Tree and delivering his own outdoor play sessions, the worker has developed play events across the area that provide a wide range of stimulating outdoor activities for children and parents. The worker has worked across the Sure Start teams and in partnership with the Play Park Rangers to deliver a collaborative approach to meeting families' needs. These outdoor play activities are aimed at parents and children coming together to participate in a range of invigorating and challenging activities that will give parents and children opportunities to develop new skills that can be duplicated at home.

Objective 4. Strengthening Families and Communities

Target PSA 4 – An increase in the proportion of families with young children reporting personal evidence of an improvement in the quality of family support services.

Response: The worker promotes events he is involved with across the programme to ensure that parents have the right information at the right time. The worker participates in the Sure Start play and learn activities as well as with across team events such as the Mini Olympics.

Objective 5 – Improving the availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare

Sure Start Noddle Hill is working towards continuity of delivery of their childcare provision, especially in terms of the crèche provision. All relevant qualified Sure Start workers are now requested to cover the crèche provision when needed and this means that the outdoor play worker can be called upon to support the crèche provision.

Local Target: Increasing productivity

The worker has involved parents and children in the planning of the outdoor play area to ensure that the area is what the local families want and will therefore use.

The worker has spent time sorting available space to efficiently and effectively store the outdoor play equipment to ensure the ease of use as well as participating at other play and learn weekly sessions to ensure continuity across the programme.

6. Monitoring

All Sure Start programmes are required by the Sure Start Unit to monitor the use of activities and sessions as well as evaluate Sure Start activity at a local level. In the case of Sure Start Noddle Hill, the monitoring of children and their families is initiated during Sure Start registration, when parents of 0-4 year olds are asked to complete a form that includes demographic and other details. Completing the form then means that the family is registered to Sure Start and entitles them to use Sure Start services.

Sure Start Noddle Hill regularly monitors the parents and children who attend the provision by the Outdoor Play Worker completing registers and attendance sheets for each session or activity. These sheets detail the names of children attending and are forwarded to the Sure Start administration team to be included in the database.

Provision Attendance

This section of the report concentrates on the attendance of the session by parents and children. Whilst collecting data it became evident that the systems in place for monitoring attendance were inadequate and that some amount of data was missing. The tables below are therefore based on the registered attendance figures for the period April-04 - Sept-04 and do not include any missed or lost registrations.

The evaluators have calculated that at least 17 % of the activity registered for this period are either missing or have not been collected. As a result, the evaluators would recommend that the following sections be treated as a guide only. The following data was collected from activity registers, which were provided manually by the Sure Start Noddle Hill administration team as accurate data could not be gleaned from the PACSIS database system.

MAY DAY FUN

This was a one-off Play and Learn event involving input from the Outdoor Play Worker where activities were provided for parents and children to celebrate May Day.

Date	Number of Parents	Number of Children
03/05/04	4	5

POND DIPPING

This was a one-off Play and Learn event. This involved input from the Outdoor Play Worker in terms of planning, ideas, and delivering the activity.

Date	Number of Parents	Number of Children
(25/05/04)	5	6

BIG TODDLE

This event involved input from several sections of the Sure Start Noddle Hill team as well as from all Sure Start local programmes in Hull. The local programmes came together to hold an event in East Park with the aim of promoting Parent and Toddler provision.

Date	Number of Parents	Number of Children
09/06/04	10	10

THE HEALTH EVENT

This event was a one-off cross team event involving input from the Outdoor Play worker. This event was held outside to promote healthy living and raise awareness within local families of possible health issues.

Date	Parents	Children
10/06/04	16	20

BRIDLINGTON TRIP

This trip was a one-off Play and Learn event, involving the input from the Outdoor Play Worker, who assisted in planning and delivery of the trip.

Date	Number of Parents	Number of Children
19/06/04	15	18

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE CLUB

These sessions are delivered and planned by the Outdoor Play worker as part of the Outdoor Play provision, they are held regularly at the Sure Start Lemon Tree outside play area, which was designed and developed by the Outdoor Play worker.

Date	Number of Parents	Number of Children
Session (02/08/04)	1	3
Session (09/08/04)	1	3
Session (16/08/04) Mini Olympics	10	16
Session (23/08/04)	2	4
Session (06/09/04)	3	5

MULTI-CULTURAL DAY

This was a one-off event involving all Sure Start teams and includes input from the Outdoor Play worker, in terms of ideas and planning of the day and activities.

Date	Parents	Children
(29-09-04)	29	30

SEWERBY TRIP

This was a one-off event that involved the input of the Sure Start Play and Learn team. The Outdoor Play Worker contributed to this activity during the planning and delivery stages.

Date	Parents	Children
(22/09/04)	19	19

Summary of findings

Analysis of the monitoring data shows that a total of 67 parents and 74 children have accessed an activity or session that has been provided or part provided by the outdoor play provision during the evaluation period and that these parents and children are from a total of 57 families.

Eight Sure Start registered parents and 16 Sure Start registered children attended at least one of the workers five regular sessions (Outdoor Adventure Club), delivered during the evaluation period. Two parents and three children attended at least four of the five delivered session.

In addition to this, 63 Sure Start registered parents and 66 registered Sure Start Children attended at least one of the seven cross - team sessions or one- off events which involved input from the Outdoor Play worker.

Four parents and eight children have accessed the worker's regular session plus at least one other one-off or cross-team event. 12 parents and 17 children have accessed the outdoor play provision on more than two occasions and 44 parents and 43 children accessed the outdoor play provision once during the evaluation period.

Analysis of Diary Monitoring

To better understand the role of the Outdoor Play worker within the Sure Start Outdoor Play provision, the worker recorded information daily in a dairy log. This information includes:

- What activities they undertake on a daily basis for example names of sessions or projects they deliver, meetings attended and training accessed.
- Details of the activity undertaken for example advising, delivering or assisting another team to deliver a session or project, report writing or administration.
- The approximate time taken on each activity

As well as gaining a better understanding of the role of the worker, the log aimed to identify the extent of both cross-team and multi-agency working across the Sure Start area.

Summary of Findings

The dairy monitoring logs submitted relate to the period from 05th July 2004 – 27th September 2004. It must be noted that tasks and times provided for analysis were approximations and are therefore to be used as an indicator only.

Analysis of the diary-monitoring log shows that the Outdoor Play worker spends the largest percentage of their time, approximately 34% developing new outdoor play events and activities, such as the Adventure Club. This has involved them in undertaking tasks such as preparing marketing and promotional material and investigating and preparing Health and Safety materials relating to the risk management of outdoor play. Under this heading the Outdoor Play worker continually develops existing projects, which includes the outdoor play area at lemon tree and also encompasses the purchasing, maintenance, and storage of outdoor play equipment.

The data also show that 23% of the workers time is spent in communication or project meetings; the aims of these types of meetings include the following:

- The project meetings are set up for the outdoor play provision to have input into cross-team events or activities and to facilitate work with partners and stakeholders to plan and evaluate new projects.
- Communication meetings are set up so the Outdoor Play Worker has clear routes of communication with members of the Sure Start management and staff, as well as with their responsible manager and the staff of their employing agency.

Data shows that during the evaluation period, the outdoor play provision has had regular contact with the local authority Play Park Ranger service as well as liaising with local primary schools to develop future projects.

The data also shows that the worker spends approximately 19% of their time assisting other Sure Start staff members in the preparation, planning, delivery, set up and clear away of sessions or one-off events.

Approximately 17% of the workers time is spent actually delivering specific Outdoor Play sessions such as the Adventure Club and the Stuart Harris memorial afternoon.

The remaining 7% of the role of the Outdoor Play worker is taken up with general administration such as organising desk and photocopying, training such as smoking cessation, and report writing for the management board.

7. In House Evaluation

As part of their role set out by Sure Start, the Outdoor Play worker has conducted small-scale evaluations of sessions, the results of which have been included in this report. The Outdoor Play worker has evaluated the Outdoor Adventure Club sessions by asking for the views of parents who regularly attend. Parents/Carers are asked to record their views on coloured paper, cut in the shape of leaves. By doing this worker aims to maintain the outdoor theme and incorporate an element of fun into the evaluation thus encouraging parents and carers to give their views.

Five cut-out leaves provided the views of both parents and children, who have accessed the Adventure Club. The leaves ask participants, “What did you like about today?” and “Why?”

Parents Responses	
What did you like about today?	Why?
They both liked everything	Because they could climb on the rock
Being outside without a coat	Because they had more freedom to run and jump
There was lots of toys to play with	Because they could play with the toys how they wanted to
Children’s Responses	
What did you like about today?	Why?
Play outside	It was raining
Mr Wolf game	It was fun
Running	Get wet, play in the rain
Everything	Cause I could, play in the rain

This small evaluation identifies several key points:

- Those users of the provision very much enjoy the activities provided and that playing out of doors particularly in the rain was the most fun for the children.
- Parents had noticed that their children enjoyed the physical aspect of the outdoor play provision such as climbing on rocks, running and jumping around.
- One parent commented on the range of play equipment and the flexible way that equipment is used within the provision, being flexible enough to allow children to play with the play equipment how they want to.

8. Perspectives of Stakeholders

As part of the evaluation of this provision it was important to speak to all of the relevant stakeholders to identify their views regarding the outdoor play provision. The main stakeholders identified include:

- The parents carers and children who use the provision
- Outdoor Play Worker
- The Sure Start Play and Learn Co-ordinator
- The Arts Development Worker

Perceptions of the Sure Start Outdoor Play Worker

A semi structured face-to-face interview was held with the Outdoor Play Worker. The worker explained that their main role is to promote safe outdoor play which has involved promoting acceptable risk and the utilisation of risk assessments to determine risk against potential benefits. The worker stated that this has involved them advising on outdoor play across the Sure Start teams as well as liaising with the Hull City Councils Play Park Ranger team who operate across the Sure Start area. The worker explained that their role has involved the development of an outdoor play area at Lemon Tree. The development has taken up the majority of the workers time so far and has involved them designing and obtaining play equipment. The worker has also been responsible for the design and planting of a sensory area that has plants such as lavender, reeds, and bamboo, so children can touch and smell a range of plants. The worker has also planted a number of trees such as crab apple and cherry in order to provide the children with learning opportunities that are derived from seasons including the growing and picking of fruit.

The evaluator asked the worker to list three achievements they had secured within their role. The worker felt that their main achievement had to be the development of the outdoor play area, as this had taken the majority of his

time in post. Forging effective links with organisations across the area such as the Dales gym, was cited by the worker as their second achievement. The worker also felt that raising the level of awareness of safe outdoor play across the Sure Start area was also a significant achievement.

The Outdoor Play worker listed a number of challenges that had become apparent as part of the role. The most significant challenge was in regards to raising awareness of the benefits for children gained through outdoor play. The worker has experienced parents and professionals reluctance to allow children to play outdoors because of safety concerns and as a result has worked to change views across the area. The worker believes that the benefits gained by children when playing outdoors far outweigh the risk. The worker moved on to talk about their second challenge, which centred around the Oracle financial system used for ordering products and services. As Sure Start Noddle Hill has Hull City Council as its' accountable body, they use many of their systems including Oracle. The Oracle system constitutes a list of approved providers of products and services and council workers must order all of their resources through this system. As the Outdoor Play worker found when designing and developing the outdoor play area, many of the providers who produce the materials and equipment needed for the area are not available through the ordering system and therefore the worker faced delays in completing the outdoor play area. The third challenge faced by the Outdoor Play worker was cited as the lack of a self-controlled flexible budget. An event request must be completed each time a session or activity is to be held. The request must detail the Sure Start target and objectives that will be met by the activity, how it will be marketed and publicised, what the expected outcomes are, and a narrative which presents an overview of the planned activity as well as expected costs. The event request then has to be submitted to the programme manager for approval before the activity can go ahead. The worker has found this process to be rather time consuming due to the detailed information required by the form. The worker feels that the whole process is lengthy as often the manager is unable to approve activities at short notice due to their considerable work load. Therefore the worker would

prefer a designated budget, which they feel would offer more flexibility for service design and delivery.

The Outdoor Play worker discussed the issue of line management. The worker stated that they were line managed by the Play and Learn Co-ordinator on a day-to-day basis. The Co-ordinator is responsible for dealing with annual leave requests and issues or concerns. The worker went on to explain that they did receive some professional supervision from within the Hull City Council, however the person who used to offer this has now moved on leaving the worker without any professional supervision.

The Outdoor Play worker moved on to describe the range and extent of joint-working with other agencies/organisations across the Sure Start area. The following organisations are all involved in some way with different aspects of the Sure Start outdoor play provision:

- **Hull City Council Play Park Ranger** – The worker offers advice and inspiration to park rangers on outdoor play activities such as material lists for activities, fact sheets, and verbal instruction
- **Dales Fitness Gym** – The worker has linked with this organisation making use of their facilities as possible venues
- **Urban** - The worker actively supported the development of the ash tree woodland area
- **Bransholme Green** – In the development of the ash tree woodland area
- **Other Sure Start programmes** – The worker has offered other Sure Start programmes advice and information regarding outdoor play activities and sessions.

In addition the Outdoor Play worker has offered the Sure Start Noddle Hill teams advice and information regarding outdoor play activities and sessions as well as assisting with the staffing of the crèche, working on the planning

and the development of play and learn activities, and jointly facilitating one-off events.

The worker explained that there are plans to work with the local primary school in September 2004 and establish after school outdoor play activities at Lemon Tree. The promotion of safe outdoor play was cited by the worker as the main motivator for working with these agencies and organisations.

The worker also explained how he encouraged families to participate in outdoor play activities. His efforts included continually promoting outdoor play and that talking to families wherever possible such as at events, sessions and activities. He also disseminates information by including leaflets and posters in regular mail outs and at Sure Start sessions. Based on experience, the worker feels that word of mouth is the most effective way to promote outdoor play.

With regard to securing feedback about the provision the Outdoor Play worker explained that there are a number of systems in place. Although at this point the worker was not involved in running regular sessions and therefore had not engaged many parents in the feedback process, he discussed the use of 'evaluation leaves' (paper cut outs of leaves on which parents can write comments). The worker uses this information to improve or change the session.

The evaluator asked the worker about the benefits gained by parents who attend the outdoor play sessions. The worker felt that parents secured the following gains:

- An opportunity to be out in the fresh air
- An appreciation of the outdoors
- An opportunity to raise their awareness of the environment
- Elimination of fears regarding their children playing outdoors
- An opportunity to participate in stimulating activities with their children

- An opportunity to socialise with other parents

The worker moved on to consider the benefits for children from attending outdoor play sessions. The worker felt that children gained the following from attending outdoor play session:

- An opportunity to exercise in the fresh air
- An opportunity to appreciate and experience playing outdoors
- Play and Learn opportunities in the outdoor play area
- Elimination of fears regarding playing outdoors
- An opportunity to participate in range of stimulating activities with their parents
- An opportunity to interact with other children

Overall the worker feels that a quality outdoor play provision is very much needed and that there are certain characteristics that will help to achieve this quality. These characteristics include:

- The 'Wow factor'
- Unique opportunities that are not provided through other play and learn activities
- Adaptable provision
- A non-prescriptive approach that encompasses the flexibility for children's imaginations to be engaged
- Outdoor sessions that mirror the outdoor environment and make use of what nature can offer

Perceptions of the Sure Start Play and Learn Co-ordinator

A semi structured face-to-face Interview was held with the Sure Start Play and Learn Co-ordinator in order to ascertain their views regarding the outdoor play provision.

The Co-ordinator detailed that their role within the provision was one of line management and supervision; this involves the Co-ordinator conducting regular supervision with the Outdoor Play worker (every 6 weeks) and supporting the worker on a day to day basis which includes:

- Maintaining communication between the worker, the employing agency and other team co-ordinators
- Authorising leave

The Co-ordinator stated that the main aims of the provision are:

- To engage local children and their families in outdoor play
- To promote outdoor play across the Sure Start area
- To link with schools to engage with the nurseries
- To organise one-off events and trips
- To promote the environment and encourage recycling

The Co-ordinator feels that the provision is clearly working towards these aims and is sensitive to the fact that the development of the outdoor play area at Lemon Tree has limited the amount of time available for achieving the other aims.

The interview moved on to focus on the benefits gained by parents and children who use the provision. The Co-ordinator feels that the benefits to be gained by families accessing the provision are as follows:

- Opportunity to participate in outdoor play
- To be involved in the planning of sessions
- To experience the outdoors
- To understand what is a reasonable risk to take

When asked how the worker encourages parents to participate in outdoor play, the Co-ordinator explained that the worker encourages parents wherever and whenever he can by accessing parents who attend Sure Start sessions, by disseminating leaflets and by continually promoting outdoor play.

The Co-ordinator discussed the issue of working with other agencies, in particular the Play Park Rangers as the Outdoor Play worker has given them a significant amount of support. The Co-ordinator explained that the worker has been approached by the Play Park Rangers and been asked to generate ideas, offer advice, and give professional opinions for planning future outdoor play sessions for children of all ages. The Co-ordinator also confirmed the links that have been forged with a number of other organisations such as Urban. One of the remits for the Outdoor Play worker is to link with the schools and due to time constraints this has not yet been possible.

The evaluator asked if the worker had any input into other Noddle Hill Sure Start teams. The Co-ordinator explained that the worker regularly supported the crèche provision and assisted other teams to organise and deliver one-off events such as the Big Toddle and the Health event. In addition to this the Co-ordinator stated that the worker offered the teams an experienced point of view when planning outdoor events.

In terms of challenges faced by the provision, the Co-ordinator feels the most significant challenge is actually engaging parents and enabling them to develop a play based relationship with their children, independent of the worker. This is particularly difficult when some of the children appear not to like playing outdoors. The Co-ordinator is keen that the provision retain its focus with children aged 0-4, rather than with older children who are more likely to engage in outdoor activity and views with the primary schools as key to facilitating this.

The evaluator focused on quality of the provision and asked how the provisions quality is monitored; feedback forms and verbal feedback from users were both cited as ways of monitoring quality. The Co-ordinator added

that there is a complaints procedure in place within Sure Start to deal with any complaints regarding the provision and that no complaints have been made regarding the provision so far.

Perceptions of parents using the provision

Informal interviews were held with parents who had accessed the outdoor play provision sessions with their children. A total of seven parents were interviewed, all of whom were registered as Sure Start users.

The parents discussed what it was that had encouraged them to attend the outdoor play sessions. Two parents had been given flyers, informing them about the sessions, the Outdoor Play worker had invited one parent to attend the session, and the others stated the following as reasons for attending:

“So that our children can play outside”

“My child loves to play outside, running free and getting rid of some energy”

“So that my child can have to freedom in a safe place”

Two parents stated that they attended the outdoor play sessions every week, one of these participants explained that her son had loved playing in the rain and sliding on the grass and that seeing her son’s enjoyment in the rain had encouraged her to attend regularly. Three parents indicated that they were planning to attend every week regardless of the weather. One parent explained that they didn’t have a garden area at home appropriate for their child to play in so needed the outdoor play provision. Two participants stated they would attend outdoor play sessions if the weather is nice.

The parents were asked what they liked about the outdoor play area at Lemon Tree. All of the responses were positive. Parents made particular comments regarding the following:

- How safe and secure the play area is, with one way in and out
- Everything within the area being well planned and thought out.
- The grass being really soft, springy and at different lengths adding something different to the play area
- The enclosed sand pit
- All the small wooden play equipment being good
- The hill

Parents felt that the main benefits to be gained by children attending the outdoor play sessions would include:

- The opportunity to mix with other children outside, in a place that is safe, as it is free from needles and broken glass.
- Exercise and fresh air
- Freedom and the opportunity to use their own imagination
- The opportunity for them to take supervised risks
- Experience nature, when they look and play with the grass or leaves

The main benefits to be gained by the parents from attending the outdoor play sessions they felt would include:

- The opportunity to learn ideas from the Outdoor Play worker of how to play with your child, what your children are interested in, what is an acceptable risk and about nature
- The opportunity to socialise with other parents
- The opportunity to just watch your children play safely outside and see how they react in different situations
- Exercise running around with the children and taking part in activities
- Peace; it's nice to sit and unwind outside

The evaluator asked participants what sorts of activities were provided as part of the session. Four parents who had attended a themed outdoor play session

(Mini Olympics) explained that the session incorporated elements of the Olympic Games, for example there was various mini races put on for the children and their parents and activities such as throwing bean bags instead of shot put. Parents who had attended these particular sessions indicated that they particularly liked the children receiving certificates for participating. The parents who attend the regular outdoor play sessions explained that the approach of the worker was to allow the children to use their own imaginations when using the outdoor play equipment. Equipment such as hoops, balls, rope, beanbags and nets are placed around the play area and utilised by the children in any way that they want. The parents also stated that the Outdoor Play worker had many ways of using the play equipment and made use of the whole outdoor play area, showing the children and parents/carers different simple fun games that they could do themselves in the play area or repeat at home.

Parents talked about what they thought their children had particularly enjoyed about the sessions. Their views included:

- Running in the mini races
- The nature aspect to the sessions; *“my child would spend the whole session looking at grass, touching leaves and running up and down the hill”*
- Interaction with the worker when playing with the play equipment

When asked if parents had been invited to become involved in the running or planning of sessions, six participants stated that they had not yet been approached. One parent did say that they had been asked for ideas relating to the sessions and that they had told the worker that it would be really good if groups of parents could get together and use the outdoor play area whenever they wanted.

The parents then gave their views and comments about the Outdoor Play Worker. These were:

“The worker is enthusiastic and hands on”

“I trust and have confidence in the worker”

“The worker has some great ideas and interacts with the children well”

“The worker really enjoys what he does”

“The worker enjoys the activities as much as the kids do”

“My Son loves the worker’s session”

As part of the study parents were asked to gauge their satisfaction of the provision, the results are as follows:

Satisfaction Rating	Frequency
Very Satisfied	5
Satisfied	1
Neither satisfied or un satisfied	1
Un satisfied	0
Very unsatisfied	0



Six out of the seven parents were either satisfied or very satisfied. One parent was not sure about their level of satisfaction as they had not attended the session for sufficient time to make a judgement. Parents did not indicate any dissatisfaction with the provision.

The evaluator asked parents if they had noticed any changes in their children since they have been attending the outdoor play session. Two parents were able to answer this question as they had regularly attended the outdoor play session. The other parents felt that they hadn't attended enough session to contribute changes in their children to outdoor play. The parents able to answer the question were given a list of possible changes and were asked to indicate the level of change noticed, using a scale rating. In terms of children's physical fitness, one parent stated that they had notice that their child's physical fitness had greatly improved, the other parent stated that their child's physical fitness had neither improved nor become worse. The first parent had noticed that their children's mental ability had improved particularly when concentrating. The other parent had not noticed any change. In terms of happiness, both participants stated that their children's happiness had improved especially after a session. One parent had noticed an improvement in their children's ability to share with others while the other parent had noticed no change. In regards to children's communication skills, social skills and creativity neither parent had noticed any change.

One parent had noticed other changes in their child since attending outdoor play sessions, such as sleeping and resting much easier, and that they felt that this could be attributed to fresh air gained during the sessions.

Although not all the parents had noticed changes in their children, all the parents felt that outdoor play provisions had the ability to have a positive impact especially in terms of physical fitness, happiness, and mental ability of their children.

The parents offered the following comments and suggestions with regard to developing and improving the provision:

“The sessions are a little inconsistent, sometimes they are on and sometimes they are not”

“Could do with a slide”

“Would like to see more interaction with wildlife, maybe a bird table”

“Better advertised and maybe an incentive for parents to attend sessions”

Parent Case Study

Jenny first became aware of Sure Start when the main Sure Start building was completed. She popped in to see what Sure Start was all about and was given a tour and an activity list on her first visit. She found that there were lots of age relevant things for children under 4, that the staff she met were nice and friendly, and that it was all a positive experience. Before accessing Sure Start, she spent the majority of her time at home, sleeping, baking, gardening and tending to her horses. She found herself saying “no” a lot to some of the things that her son wanted to do, for example the messy things. She felt that he would benefit from engaging in new activities and she also wanted fresh ideas of things that they could do together.

Jenny wanted to attend Sure Start activities and sessions that she felt her son would enjoy the most, as he wasn't really interested in the more traditional types of toys as he mainly enjoyed playing outside and watching T.V. As a result, they both attend almost all of the Sure Start outdoor play provision, including outdoor one-off events. They also attended some Sure Start soft play sessions.

Jenny feels that her son has really benefited from attending these sessions and activities provided by Sure Start Noddle Hill, as his walking, speech and independence have improved significantly. *Jenny* feels that her son really

relates to the Outdoor Play worker and has heard him say words to the worker that she has never heard him use before.

Jenny also feels she has benefited. She was signposted to the Drive To Work scheme run by Hull DOC and Employment Service and is currently having driving lessons as a result of the scheme. She feels that she would not have been able to access such services if it wasn't for Sure Start Noddle Hill. She also feels as though she has learnt to play and be herself in front of her son; she no longer feels embarrassed to sing songs to him while walking down the street.

Jenny summed the provision up as it:

"Gets you out of the house and enables you to enjoy your child"

9. Cost of the Outdoor Play Provision

Some analysis of the cost relating to the provision was undertaken with the aim of determining how much the provision costs the programme per individual parent and child and also in terms of number of contacts. All financial data relating to the provision was provided by the Sure Start Noddle Hill local programme and relates to the same period of analysed monitoring data, April 04 – Sep 04. These costs are as outlined below:

	<u>Cost</u>
Development of Outdoor Play area at the main Sure Start building Lemon Tree.	£5895.55
Salary of worker – 6month period scale 3 @ 15 hours	£4708.00
Total	£10603.55

The monitoring data shows that the outdoor play area has been used a total of 84 times by parents and children. Given the cost of £5895.55 for establishing this provision, it is clear that the local programme will need to increase the usage of this provision in order to class it as being cost effective. With this in mind, it may be better give an indication of how the costs would be reduced depending on the number of contacts.

The following table shows that if the outdoor play area if used only 84 it will be at a cost of £70.19 per parent or child per use. If the number of times the outdoor play area is used doubles this cost will be halved, and so on.

Number of times used	Cost per parent or child per use
84	£70.19
168	£35
252	£23.39
336	£17.54
420	£14.04
504	£11.70
588	£10.02
672	£8.77
756	£7.80
840	£7.02
924	£6.38
1008	£5.84

Another way of looking at the costs is to estimate the lifetime of the outdoor play equipment. Given that the equipment may last five years the current users have made use of 20% of the lifetime of the equipment equating **a cost to date of £14.04 per parent or child, per contact, in terms of equipment costs.**

By removing the initial outlay costs for the outdoor play area it is possible to calculate the following:

17% of the worker's time is direct contact time at sessions, equating to a cost of £800. Given that there were 84 direct contacts at the outdoor play area this equates to **a direct staff cost of £9.52 per parent or child, per direct contact.**

If the lifetime of the equipment percentage cost is added to the proportion of direct staff time cost, **the cost per contact, per parent or child, including equipment costs is currently £23.55**

With regard to cross-team events the worker has invested a minimum of 19% of their time into specifically developing services. As 129 parents and children have benefitted, **a cost of £6.90 per parent or child, per contact, can be attributed to cross-team working events.**

It is important to consider a number of other factors that may have a bearing on cost related decisions. These include:

- Other people can be classed as beneficiaries of the Sure Start outdoor play provision although they are not included in the calculations above, such as non-Sure Start users attending the one-off events.
- Any cost based decision must attach a value to the benefits that parents and children have gained. Many of these benefits may not become apparent for quite some time yet. For example the parent in the case study has learnt to drive as a result of being signposted to other services. This may improve her employability and bring a direct impact on the household income and lifestyle of the family.
- There are no similar schemes available against which to make a cost comparison.
- The calculations above refer to the costs relating to direct contact time at the outdoor play area. Costs have not been included relating to such things as planning and meeting time and as such these costs and any additional benefits that may arise need to be included in future cost benefit studies.
- As the use of the provision increases the cost benefits will also increase

10. Summary of the Strengths of the Provision

- The provision works towards achieving Sure Start Objectives
- It is a free provision
- Provision is open and inclusive responding to the needs of users
- The provision regularly has input into all Sure Start events and sessions
- The provision informs users, partners and the Sure Start teams of the benefits gained by children from playing outdoors
- The provision informs users, partners and the Sure Start teams of how to manage the risk of playing outdoors
- Provision has developed a quality, unique, and user friendly outdoor play area
- Provision is energetic, enthusiastic and creative in its approach
- Provision has made some effective links with partner organisations, creating a collaborative approach to providing outdoor play for families with young children
- The provision has clear outcomes for children and families
- Worthwhile social activity for parents and children
- Users gain knowledge and experience of playing outdoors and can repeat the activities at home without incurring costs

11. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Sure Start Noddle Hill outdoor play provision has been successfully established as an integral part of the services available for parents and carers with young children in area. Having understood the benefits of outdoor play and employed the expertise to effectively manage risk, Sure Start Noddle Hill is now able to offer local families the opportunity to participate in stimulating, physical activities, using modern and flexible outdoor play equipment. In addition, the provision has developed links, both internally and externally, in order to maximise the input that outdoor play can have in supporting the emotional and physical development of local children. As such, the outdoor play provision has creatively contributed towards achieving the local programme's targets and objectives.

Parents and carers who have engaged with the provision report high levels of satisfaction and can clearly identify the ability of the provision to have a positive impact on their children. The parent case study illustrates the benefits for both parent and child and highlights the fact that participation with the outdoor play provision can act as a springboard for involvement with other services, thus introducing wider benefits to the family.

It is also clear from the evaluation that the outdoor play provision is still in the early stages of development. Much of the worker's time has been spent actually developing the physical outdoor site and ensuring that the facilities are in place. Due to the time constraints, development of a programme of regular outdoor activities has been quite limited. Regular sessions have only been running during the last quarter of this year and therefore the number of regular beneficiaries at the point of evaluation was low. Having said this, there is wealth of evidence to show that there are significant number of parents and children who have had a total of 254 contacts with the provision, namely in terms of one-off events and trips.

It is possible to conclude that this piece of evaluation work will best serve as a baseline picture from which to measure the future progress of the provision. Evaluators anticipate that now the ground work has been completed and the facilities are established, more of the worker's time can be invested in attracting parents and children to use the provision on a regular basis. The actual cost of running the provision is not high and the provision usually runs without attracting additional costs such as materials and other consumables. Inevitably as more parents and children use the service, it will become significantly more cost effective.

Since the local programme has invested well in establishing the outdoor play provision the natural progression will now be to maximise the use of the provision in facilitating further community development. This will be best achieved by developing existing plans to continue raising awareness of the benefits of outdoor play and encouraging local parents and carers to see the value of managed risk. Initial work with primary schools should be maintained and developed, thus increasing the physical access to the outdoor play area and satisfying the remit of provision for children up of the age of 8. A regular and consistent outdoor play session should be offered to parents and children as part of the general programme of activities offered by Sure Start Noddle Hill. This could be specifically targeted at the under 4's to retain a focus on service provision for younger children. The local programme may also wish to consider increasing the availability of access to the outdoor play area. For example, the facilities could be made available to any parent with a young child in the area each morning or afternoon. Parents would be requested to sign in with the receptionist before using the facilities and this opportunity could also be used to promote Sure Start and its' partners. An open outdoor play week could be held to raise awareness of the facilities and Sure Start parents may wish to become involved in planning and facilitating this. A banner advertising the site, and a free cup of tea for parents, may entice local families to use the facilities. The local press would also be a good source for encouraging parents to use the Lemon Tree site, particularly as the press has previously reported on parent's dismay at the fact that there are no safe public areas where very young children can play; something that was also reported

through the Sure Start parent satisfaction survey conducted by Sure Start Noddle Hill.

The local programme may also wish to investigate the reasons behind why some parents, carers and children may not choose to consider using the outdoor play facilities. This will provide valuable information that will inform strategies aimed at maximising the use of the provision. The local programme must also consider developing a more robust system to monitor attendance and outcomes for parents, carers and children using the facilities. This information will be of great value when considering the future of the provision, in particular when exploring issues of future funding and sustainability. As previously mentioned work can also be done to encourage, train, and support local parents and carers to take on responsibility for planning and facilitating outdoor play sessions, thus strengthening community development and contributing to the sustainability of quality outdoor play opportunities in the area.

Overall, the outdoor play provision has enhanced the scope of service delivery at Sure Start Noddle Hill. The dedication, enthusiasm and specialist knowledge of the Outdoor Play Worker has secured a quality outdoor play environment at the local programme. As the provision moves into the next stages of its development it has the potential to yield significant benefits not only to Sure Start users but also to the wider community. It is therefore a final recommendation of this study that the outdoor play provision continue to be supported and that the impact of the provision be further evaluated at a future stage.