

Play in the community



**Hillyfields Community Park
Gillingham, Kent**

Strong partnership working between Medway Council, Groundwork Kent & Medway and the residents is the key to success that has helped develop and improve a community park in Gillingham, Kent. A total of £660,000 funding from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Liveability and Section 106 Agreements was secured to improve the Hillyfields Community Park during two phases.

The park's makeover began in 2006 with the upgrading of the paths around the park.

Groundwork Kent and Medway was selected as the design and build partner and put together plans to link the footpath network around the site, install a flight of steps leading to the top tier of the site to replace a muddy slope. This improved access to an old orchard area, which now forms part of a community project, is also being overseen by Groundwork.

The Friends of Hillyfields' association and pupils at nearby schools have helped shape the project; new entrances feature engraved paving slabs with poems written by pupils have been installed. New park furniture finished phase 1 of the park's facelift and has helped instil faith in the area and a new

found respect for the park's integrity as a community asset.

Three years on and phase two has been completed. Joint working between the community, nearby schools, Medway Council and Groundwork helped inform the design of the new play area.

Groundwork carried out a series of workshops in schools to find out what children wanted from the play area. From this point a well-informed and innovative design developed using natural materials and landform mixed with exciting play equipment. What has made this play area unique is the introduction of ditches, boulders, bridges and a mosaic of grass swards that offer an exciting adventure beyond the traditional equipped play area. The final design was then consulted on and tendered out through a design and build contract with Groundwork Kent and Medway. SSG Landscapes was selected as the construction partner and works began in September 2008.

Phase 2 information
Designer: Groundwork Kent and Medway
Client: Medway Council
Area of Project: 5500sqm
Project Costs: £261,479 play area
£41,369.40 design, tender, delivery
Construction Contractor: SSG Landscapes
Fund Sources: Section 106 and Biffaward
Start and finish date (construction):
September 2008-November 2008

Trends and Initiatives

Bernard Spiegel, PLAYLINK

The publication of Play England's *Design for Play: A Guide to Creating Successful Play Spaces* – the authors of which include PLAYLINK Associates, Phil Doyle and Aileen Shackell, was one of the year's notable and positive developments in the field of children's play.

There needs to be radical change in the nature and extent of play opportunities... And undoubtedly there is some movement in the right direction – Design for Play's core message embodies this. But proponents and instigators of change need now to be particularly alert – vigilant – against the temptation, and the promptings from particular interests, to indulge in action that amount to no more than nods and gestures towards what a sceptical commentator might describe as the 'new orthodoxy': 'We'll do you a nature-like fallen tree and boulders, Gov', saith many a play equipment manufacturer, 'we now manufacture them; and we now do a bit of landscape design too.'

It is however a good thing that seemingly every play equipment manufacturer now carries a copy of Design for Play in their back pockets. Play providers need, however, to remember the obvious: 'natural' spaces are grown, not manufactured. Landscaped spaces are designed, and not simply space available for equipment. Nothing wrong in principle with play equipment, of course. PLAYLINK

specifies equipment where we think appropriate. But designing the space as a whole comes first. Working with the actual and potential resources of space is the starting point.

The degree to which the £235m being pumped into play with indecent haste will ultimately mean £235m worth of better places to play, remains to be seen. PLAYLINK has expressed its scepticism here.

Nevertheless, we are working with authorities to maximise the benefits to be derived from the flush of Pathfinder and Playbuilder funding. And here words of support, praise and respect need to be directed to the many local authority Officers, and their voluntary sector counterparts, who are making incredible efforts to create play spaces to be proud of despite Government's tightly timetabled spending requirements, that defy ordinary notions of common sense. There is much to be admired in the public sector.

I'm reluctant to turn this piece into a PLAYLINK promo (well, only a little), but it is worth mentioning the Study Tours we undertake, not least the notable residential Play Study Tour in Stirling. This two day residential, led by Sue Gutteridge and Judi Legg, has had a positive reception way beyond our expectations.

And this makes one quite optimistic: what we encounter is a real hunger for knowledge, a capacity for debate and well-mannered dissent, and the benefits of bringing together intelligent and committed people from a range of interests and backgrounds,



Shorne Country Park

but who share a common commitment to creating best possible play spaces. The food on the tour is good, too.

Positive examples of play space designs, 2008

**Invermead Close Playable Space, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
Landscape architect: Paul Shaw**

This high density housing development is relatively new, having been opened some three years ago. Children and young people had been using a fenced area adjacent to a housing block. The area was located within only a few metres of residents' sitting room windows and noise from the ball games and from the large numbers using it were proving to be a great source of irritation to residents.

A lengthy process of engagement and involvement followed. Workshops were held on the site, which included discussions with all the local residents – adults without children, families, and the children and young people who used the space mainly for ball games. A design was developed by a landscape architect for a shared communal space on the grassy verge adjacent to the housing block. The design created a playable space – a space which invited play, though one

“There needs to be a radical change in the nature and extent of the play opportunities we offer children and young people”

not designated solely for play. The new layout included a fallen tree, shrub planting to provide a protective buffer to the residents' windows, and a small 'play mound', as well as some boulders, a new pathway, and two separate timber seating areas that double as stepping stones or climbing structures. The new layout for this area has already encouraged adults and children to meet and talk to each other, even though the space was opened to the residents in January 2008, the coldest time of year when people's use of the outdoors is minimal. Time spent on developing design proposals was time well spent, to make sure that 'the right answer is found for the right problem'. A creative approach was needed to make the most of such a small space so close to housing.

Though the design fee added to the cost, in this situation using a designer's skill meant that a satisfactory design solution was found,

even on a very low budget of £20,000.

**Glamis Community Nursery, Tower Hamlets, London
Landscape architect: Paul Shaw**

The outdoor area at Glamis Community Nursery was transformed from an uninspiring, hard surface area into a richer greener play space, featuring artificial grass – I'm afraid, we had no choice for this given the scandalously limited outside space available – wood, water and willow den. We're told that the children are happier, more engaged and calmer when outside, than previously. We shall be checking if the changes are sustained.

Play area Shorne Country Park, Kent

The installation of a cutting-edge design play area was completed last spring at Kent County Council's Shorne Woods Country Park, near Gravesend.

The timber play area is only the second one of its kind in Britain – the other being in Nottinghamshire – and a first for Kent. It has been designed for older children and teenagers to challenge them both physically and mentally, as they choose how to use the equipment and how exciting they want their own play to be.

The equipment consists of a timber tangle, a climbing structure and an unusual see-saw, so children can choose between dangling, swinging, climbing, balancing, or just sitting. It is also designed to have many children using it at once to aid social interaction. Timber from a sustainable woodland resource has been used to make the facility. The play area has been specifically located in an area of woodland adjacent to the existing play area for younger children and is surrounded by trees, so it feels like part of the woodland.

Country Parks Area Manager for Kent County Council, Amanda Dunk said: "Older children and teenagers can sometimes miss out when it comes to play areas at parks like this, so it's great to see a facility that will be challenging and enjoyable for them."

Project details

Designed & constructed by: Timberplay Ltd www.timberplay.com
Start/completion dates Feb-April 2008
All timber used was sourced from sustainable sources that meet Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standards to minimise the impact on the environment. The design had to be sensitive to its environment because Shorne Woods Country Park is an Area of Special Scientific Interest.