



# Consultation: don't ask?

Above: Sand – and water too.  
Adventure playground, Tower Hamlets

I want in this article to criticise what is commonly termed 'consultation'. I want in particular to criticise 'consultation' as it too often affects decisions about play provision.

I limit myself in this article to two main arguments.

The need, and the assumed simple and obvious rightness of consulting people, – children, young people and adults – form one of the pillars of current institutional and political belief. There is the sense that it must be right to consult – that it is beyond question. That consultation too often results in quite woeful places to play, appears to be of no great matter. Consultation has become self-justifying – doing it justifies doing it. Apply this logic to, for example, cooking and the oddity of the disconnect between process and desired outcome becomes stark. The desired outcome of cooking is, presumably, a good meal. It's hard to argue that one cooks for cooking's sake. That in certain circumstances

the act of cooking is part of a learning process, is another matter, one that provides a clue about what we should be trying to do when we engage with people, certainly in respect of play. More on this later.

Taking an informed, sceptical approach to consultation is a matter made all the more urgent now that Government has announced its Pathfinder and Playbuilder

programmes. These programmes put a considerable amount of public money into the creation of places for play. That play provision needs and deserves at least the £235m foreshadowed in *Fair Play: a consultation on the play strategy* we take as axiomatic. However, the money is to be spent with unseemly haste. There is therefore the very real danger that local authorities, in the rush to meet Government's arbitrary, imposed and unrealistic spending targets, will feel they have little time to do other than repeat habitual, mechanistic and mistaken approaches to 'consultation'. The need to be 'pragmatic' and to achieve 'quick wins' takes hold. Of course, the flip

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## Bernard Spiegel

Bernard Spiegel runs PLAYLINK. He is particularly interested in the creation, and protection, of spaces – temporal and physical – within which people of all ages can control their own use of time. Creating 'playable spaces' that are integral to the wider public realm is one expression of this commitment.

A theme running through all Bernard's work is the need to understand and value risk: life is unutterably dull without it.

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**Wants and choices**

In this article, consultation is understood as asking questions about ‘wants’ or ‘choices’. That a range of techniques can be deployed to pose questions is not at issue. Whether or not the consultation is awash with post-it notes stuck to sheets of paper headed with ‘themes’, or children and adults are delightedly drawing their versions of the perfect playspace, or building models, or brainstorming and being facilitated to within an inch of their lives, the essence of these exercises is to pose questions. And this is the first and fundamental error – one reinforced by the seemingly endless stream of toolkits and good practice guides. Creating good play spaces – and much else – does not begin with asking questions about wants. It begins with having a point of view about what constitutes a good play space. And what constitutes a good play space is not a given, nor a set of uncontentious assumptions. It is an area of contestation and needs to be treated as such. Simplifying or obscuring the issues simply misdirects attention away from the task at hand: creating best possible play opportunities. For a graphic illustration of an almost perfectly formed example of bad practice in the area of consultation, it is worth taking a look the Department for Children, Schools and Families ‘Build Your Play Space’ web site. The site simply replicates on the web the habit of presenting consultation choices via play equipment catalogues.

‘If I’d asked my customers what they wanted, they’d have said a faster horse’ – so said Henry Ford who appears to have clearly understood the limitations inherent in simply consulting people about what they take to be their needs and wants. Donald Rumsfeld, one time USA Secretary of Defence, had a take on this as well, and seems, in this matter at least, to display some insight when he observed that, ‘... there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don’t know.’ So here we have Argument One in the critique of consultation: people

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cannot know what they do not know. And if you simply ask ‘what do people want?’ The answer is likely to have the shape and content of the past. Simple-minded consultation engenders mimicry, not advance. This applies no less to children and young people whose experience is necessarily limited.

**Politics and ethics**

Argument two rests on political and ethical considerations. For the purposes of this article, argument two has particular salience when we consider capital investments. Broadly speaking, significant capital investments are designed to have a life of ten or more years. Certainly so far as play is concerned, any play area or feature aims to serve more than one cohort of children. Over time, different sets of children will use and grow out of a particular play

investment; they will move on to other experiences and opportunities, and a new cohort of children will take their place to use the output of that initial capital investment. However, only one cohort of children or local residents will have an opportunity to be consulted, that cohort being the one that happens to be around at the time the investment is to be made. To the degree that their wishes are met, is the degree to which those choices in effect curtail the choices of subsequent cohorts of children and residents. One set of people are asked questions, another group of people are presented with a series of givens. What’s missing here is any sense of people as anything other than consumers. As consumers people are perfectly entitled to act as witness and judge in determining their own predilections and interests. Where they go for a holiday is a matter for

Below: PLAYLINK associate Phil Doyle arguing a point

Bottom: PLAYLINK scheme: risk with benefit



“It is not the process of choosing equipment and trying to fit it into a space. It is the process of addressing the space as a whole site and its wider context”



them. But people are not simply consumers when they are involved in decisions about spending public money. Rather, they are required to fulfil a role more akin to being a trustee – their decisions are decisions-in-trust for this and future generations. To fulfil this role, deciders-in-trust are obliged to be, or to become, informed decision-makers. The task they are involved in, to the extent that they permit themselves to be involved in decision-making, is the difficult, sensitive task of determining what represents ‘public benefit’. And we should not be timid in insisting that this requires some sense of what constitutes ‘good’ when we speak about creating play opportunities. This question cannot be reduced to the task of choosing one piece of play equipment as against another.

#### The answer?

So, what to do? The age old answer applies: start in a different place, head in a different direction. Here’s, more or less, what we do when we’re commissioned to design and deliver play schemes whether in supervised or unsupervised settings. ‘Stakeholders’ and other interests are gathered

together. We do not ask what people want. We do not suggest to people that we will be asking what they want in any simple-minded way. Instead, we initiate a discussion about play, childhood, play spaces and what they should be designed to do. We show examples of spaces for play – one’s that are often new to people. ‘Gosh, never knew that was possible’, is a not uncommon response. ‘Ah, but it is’, is our response. We suggest that it will be useful to focus attention on formulating a design brief, one that our landscape architects (usually also present) can use as a basis for interpreting the particular site under view. In the brief we are explicit about the need to design-in risk-taking opportunities. This is useful because it can prompt a shared consideration of this difficult subject. We point out that accidents are not necessarily bad. Bullets are bitten.

This type of process establishes the terms, and style, of engagement between design team and stakeholders. It is exploratory, both of ideas and what they might mean translated into a design. Both the potential scope, and the limitations, of the site under view are discussed. A concept or theme emerges, it is developed and interpreted. This type of process does not generally lead to the generation of two or more option proposals. Why? Because good design has an internal logic; each aspect relates to another, it forms a cohesive whole. There is flexibility to change and develop within the agreed overarching concept, of course.

This, therefore, is not the process of choosing equipment and trying to fit it into a space. It is the process of addressing the space as a whole site and its wider context. And where equipment is used, it is deployed in support of the overarching design concept. The aim is to make the whole space delightfully playable.

Finally, to answer the question I sense lurking in many a reader’s mind: does this form of learning engagement take very long? No, it does not.

More about PLAYLINK can be found on [www.playlink.org.uk](http://www.playlink.org.uk).

Above left: Breaking conventions: PLAYLINK scheme for Registered Social Landlord

Left: Revamped adventure playground in Tower Hamlets

