

Inclusive play: Newcastle City Council

Summary

We held several engagement events with and facilitated by disabled people to develop a three-year plan to promote equality. One of the key issues raised was around the suitability of the surfaces of play areas and the lack of inclusive play equipment in the city's playgrounds, along with the lack of information on location and types of play areas suitable for use by disabled children.

Two key outcomes were identified to help promote inclusive play:

- Provide further information and raise awareness about what facilities were on offer at parks and play areas.
- Inclusion of more accessible equipment in key play areas, including audio and visual equipment suitable for use by all children.

Traditionally play equipment suitable for children with complex disabilities or sensory impairments has been located within specialist school sites.

Who is involved?

All play areas in Newcastle were mapped and audited according to their condition, play value and accessibility by the Play and Parks Services. 'Playability scores' for play equipment and spaces were developed, in consultation with children, to evaluate their play value. Sites were prioritised for redevelopment using the Playability scores and other factors, such as child population and indices of multiple deprivation (IMD)

The Play Service then undertook extensive consultation with children and families to work up designs for the play areas. Inclusion and access were factored into the designs. Work was done with parents of children with disabilities specifically to look at making sites accessible in local areas.

Members of our Equalities and Access team supported the on-going engagement process to inform this work. Following consultation, landscape designers designed the new sites which were procured and installed.

The challenges for us

- Sourcing inclusive play equipment initially proved difficult. Suppliers of play equipment on our approved list did not provide the type of equipment we required. This meant we had to locate suitable equipment – which was sourced initially from Germany – and go through additional procurement avenues to purchase equipment. Now that we are familiar with what inclusive equipment is available, new suppliers have now been sourced and are included within our approved list.
- Government guidelines recommend the provision of natural and environmental play areas. One of the challenges around this is the balance between using natural 'loose part' elements such as bark on the ground and the need for surfaces to be accessible to all. To overcome this we have combined different play areas by incorporating a mixture of surface areas. We also placed accessible benching and picnic tables suitable for wheelchair users within these areas.
- Road safety was highlighted by children, as a barrier to accessing play spaces and work has begun to address this issue in partnership with the Road Safety Section, building upon the 'Safe Routes to School' programme to encompass play spaces. We have begun work with colleagues from Highways and Transportation to ensure traffic calming and transport strategies are in place around play spaces.
- Some of the equipment has been subject to theft and vandalism. Scrape metal thieves have stolen parts from the equipment which have proved expensive to replace. Anti-theft bolts have been used on

new installations – however, this does not provide a complete solution. Local newspapers and radio stations have ran stories which highlighted the thefts which have helped to promote the facilities and resulted in increased use.

Outcomes

As a starting point we had an opportunity to add equipment within the on-going refurbishment of the play area at Paddy Freemans Park. It is located next to Freeman Hospital which houses a specialist unit for children with long-term health needs.

Six pieces of equipment were installed. This included an inclusive roundabout (see below) which had space for a wheelchair to access it and also seating suitable for older people who may need to hold a child.



Other equipment included is suitable for use by those with sensory impairments, and children with autism like the mirror rotunda below.



Work has just been completed at a second site, Exhibition Park, which is located next to the recently-opened city centre children's hospital unit.

Feedback from children and parents about the inclusive play areas has been extremely positive and there has been a noted increase in usage.

As a result of this approach there is more choice for disabled parents who want to access play areas within the city. Interaction through play is helping to breakdown barriers and challenge understanding and perceptions of disability by parents of non-disabled children encouraging social inclusion.

What we learnt

Previously we hadn't considered incorporating inclusive play equipment into parks, seeing equipment suitable for disabled children as being specialist and separate. We met with Newcastle Play Services and the Parks and Countryside Service to look at ways we could work together to deliver our objectives. As part of the Path Playfinder Scheme work was already underway to refurbish play areas across the city. We linked into this work so that we would be able to include more inclusive play equipment, suitable for all needs, within the overall development of identified play areas. A successful bid to the Councils Access Fund provided the funding required to help facilitate this.

Alongside this we worked with disabled children, parents and carers to help decide what equipment we should include and in which parks it should be located. Parks close to hospital facilities were initially chosen due to the number of families with both disabled and non-disabled children who use the parks located close to hospital facilities when they visit the cities hospitals.

Feedback from the group has allowed us to focus on genuine service user needs. We have engaged with both hospitals and family services to help promote play areas. Information on all parks and key playgrounds has been included in Disabledgo-Newcastle. This is a free online guide providing detailed access information for over 700 venues in the city. The information contained in the guide makes it possible for disabled people, family members or carers, to assess whether particular venues are suitable for an individual's access needs. The site has proven to be a popular tool with a high level of visitors.

[Disabledgo website](#)

A further three parks in locations across the city have been identified as potential sites for inclusive play areas where disabled children and non disabled children can come together to access facilities.

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