

Playing on the Edge!

Funded by the Froebel Trust

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**Play Preferences and Provision in Dublin City Urban Neighbourhoods:
Perspectives from Caregivers, Children and Parents.**

Facilitated by Dublin City University (DCU) & Maynooth University (MU) 2019 -2023



Acknowledgments

The researchers from Dublin City University and Maynooth University would like to convey our sincerest thanks to Hill St. Family Resource Centre, the staff, children, and their families for engaging with the project so wholeheartedly and for the authentic sharing of their experiences and perspectives on play.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the children and families who so generously shared their stories and who consented to the publishing of photos within this report.

We acknowledge and appreciate the time that was freely given by everyone in Hill St., and which enabled the forging of relationships and trust between the researchers, the educators and parents/caregivers. It has been a joy to work with an amazing management and staff team in Hill St., with whom we have learnt so much.

This project and engagement with everyone in Hill St. Family Resource Centre (FRC), would not have been possible without the support of Froebel Trust, that funded this work and continue to be champions for play.

We hope this report will be a resource to Hill St. FRC in their advocacy for children and families living in the community.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In January 2019, researchers from Dublin City University (DCU) and Maynooth University (MU) recognised that the lack of play and play opportunities in urban areas was a troubling issue for young children, their families and caregivers. Coincidentally, Dublin City Council had initiated a consultation process with stakeholders to inform a new Play Strategy.

The team could see the exciting potential that Froebelian principles held as a vehicle to advocate for better play provision, to support children, families and educators in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings and simultaneously contribute to government policy. The Froebel Research Trust issued a call for research projects which examined the relevance of Froebelian principles in children's lives today. Following the submission of a research proposal, the Trust supported the application and provided the necessary funding to facilitate this project. The research was undertaken in partnership with two settings, Hill Street Family Resource Centre (FRC) and Our Nursery, Ballymun between 2021 and 2023.

The original timeline spanned 2019-2022. However, the timeline was adapted due to the Covid-19 pandemic which restricted possibilities for research engagement. The revised timeline is outlined below.

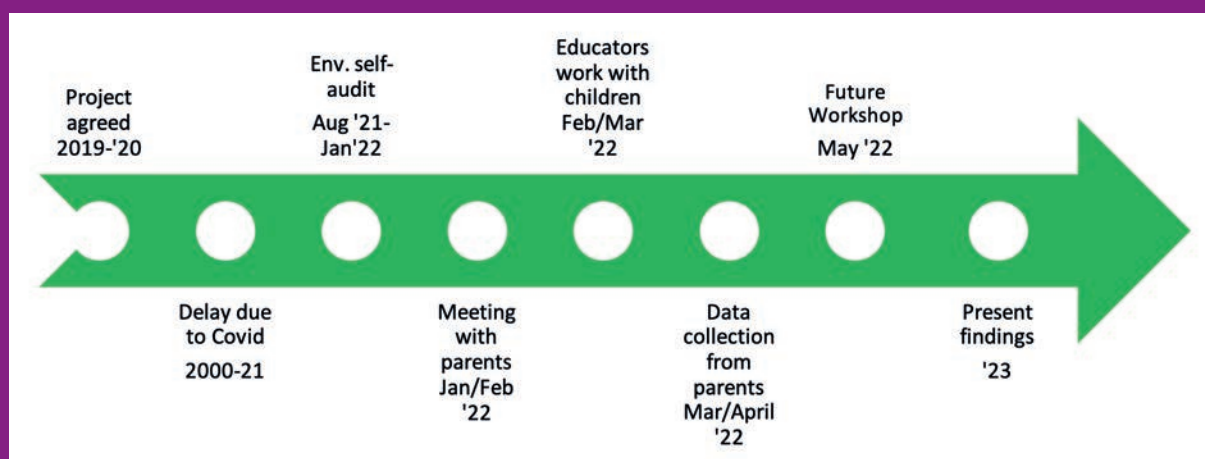


Diagram A: Project Timeline

Findings from the project, as outlined in this report, emerge from the combined work of educators, children and parents from Hill Street Family Resource Centre (FRC) in partnership with researchers from Dublin City University.

Profile of Hill Street Family Resource Centre (FRC)

Hill St. FRC is located in Northeast Inner City (NEIC) of Dublin and comprises all of Dublin 1 and parts of Dublin 3. It is an area that is bounded by the river Liffey to the south, the Tolka River to the west and East Wall to the East. This broad, diverse, and growing community experiences disadvantage and marginalisation. The total population of the NEIC is 45,812 which represents a 78% increase over 20 years (ICON). Drawing on Census 2016 data, an ESRI report on Diverse Neighbourhoods (2019), indicated that the largest share of foreign-born population nationally, amounting to almost 60%, is in the area of Mountjoy Sq. adjacent to Hill St.

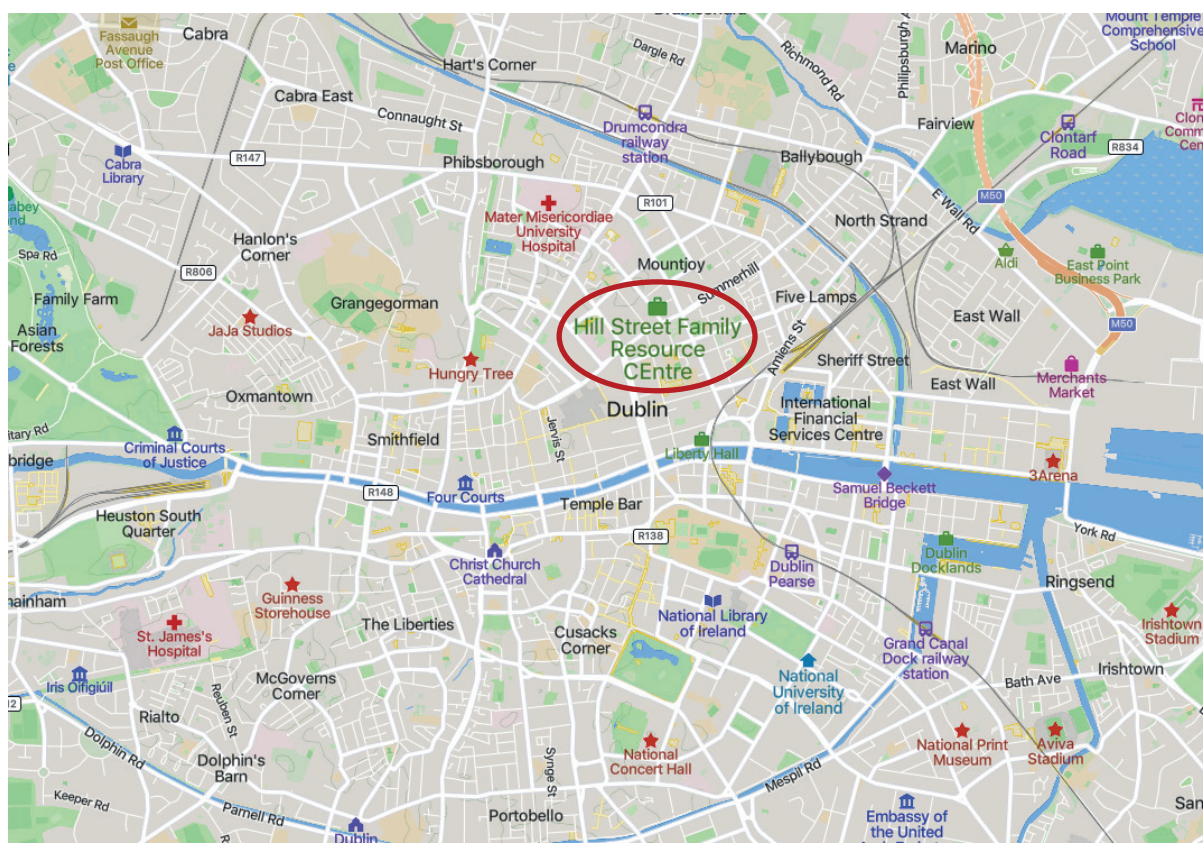


Diagram B: Location of HSFRC (Source: <https://mapcarta.com/N3641118220>)



DCU recognises Hill Street FRC as a progressive forward-thinking hub, which had collaborated previously with colleagues from DCU on the implementation of the Preparation for Preschool Programme. DCU researchers approached the management, educators, families and children of Hill Street FRC to establish their interest and willingness to participate in this new project. Providing parents/carers in the Hill St. community with the potential to have their perspectives inform the policies of Dublin City Council was the motivating factor for engagement with the research project.

Project Objective

This project had a dual focus. Whilst fundamentally it is about play preferences and provision in urban communities, it was also concerned with voice, participation and power. Since the voices of young children on matters that affect or interest them are often overlooked, in local and national policy - as are the perspectives of their parents - this project viewed children as citizens and rights-holders (UNCRC, 1989). It adopted the belief that children's opinions should be heard and acted upon and was concerned with finding a way of sharing the lived experiences and perspectives of children, their families and educators with policymakers and government agencies. Therefore, a key objective was to identify and implement a model of participation that supported empowerment.

Why the Issue of Play?

Play has long been recognised as a complex activity which is intrinsic to human development (Bandura, 1986; Izumi-Taylor, 2010). From Froebel (1826) and Tagore (1929) to Gupta (2010), the important role of play in learning and development has been recognised across cultures. In acclaiming play as the highest phase of child development, Froebel (1826) identified the value and power of play in early childhood education and beyond.

Young children are intrinsically motivated to play and will instinctively seek out places and resources to engage in all forms of play. It appears that play is universal in nature and is critically important for children's wellbeing and development, bringing social, emotional and health benefits to the early years and across the life span.

Adventurous and challenging play can be more easily facilitated in outdoor settings. The natural environment presents open-ended play prospects for both risk-taking and problem-solving, which in turn develops imagination and creativity (Ó Néill, 2020). The value of play is well recognised internationally and yet children's access to outdoor play space is diminishing (Kalpogianni, 2019). This is not a story particular to Ireland or inner-city Dublin but is a global phenomenon. The need for play spaces that work for children and families, that are adequately resourced and available locally, is an important issue for all. Children and parents have unique, lived experiences of play provision in their communities and have perspectives on what is required.

Changes in the demographic composition of families living in Dublin City over two decades presents challenges for children's play. Major issues include the lack of well-designed indoor space for families living in apartments and the diminishing availability of outdoor play spaces (The Housing Agency, 2019). The importance of play in the city appeared in a recent media report highlighting the need to create more safe streets for children, enabling them to engage in spontaneous play (Burns & Copland, 2022). The Irish Government in Better Outcomes-Brighter Futures (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2014) also acknowledges the need for child-friendly, outdoor green spaces for play. More recently First Five (Government of Ireland, 2019) envisions public play spaces designed for babies and young children which provide opportunities for engaging and connecting. Play is not only vital for children's well-being, it also supports community cohesion, builds a sense of belonging, combats loneliness and improves the overall standard of living in an area. In fact, Macintyre et al. (2002) propose that there are five features that affect the health of a neighbourhood, one of which is play environments (Errigo, 2019). Play is an issue of interest to children, families, educators, policymakers and politicians.

However, ensuring adequate play spaces and affording appropriate play opportunities requires the perspectives and insights of those who are primarily affected by the current provision. Children and families who use and depend on local play areas have tacit knowledge that needs to be shared with those who produce the policies and design the play spaces.

Chapter 2

Methodology



The participation of children and families was core to the success of the project and informed the research design. In fact, the transformation of communities is critical to the success of Participatory Action Research (Giroux, 1983). The methodology chosen is also consistent with the Froebelian emphasis on the uniqueness of each child and their central positioning within the research.

The DCU/Maynooth team adopted a Participative Action Research (PAR) approach that focused on listening to those who had direct experience of play in the community. A PAR approach ensures that research is done “for and with people who define issues of pressing concern” (Egmoose et al., 2020: 241). The project sought to develop a vision for play in Dublin City Centre, designed by children, their families and educators. The Future Workshop approach is a form of PAR, and it provided guidance on how to elicit and listen to the perspectives of the research participants at each stage of the project (Jungk and Muller, 1996).

Future Workshop Approach

Robert Jungk and Norbert Müller developed the Future Workshop methodology to provide a research framework to support the empowerment of participants and enable them to create their own futures (Ollenbury, 2019). Effective Future Workshop approaches take time, as it requires the building of relationships between researchers and participants.

The Future Workshop consisted of four phases:

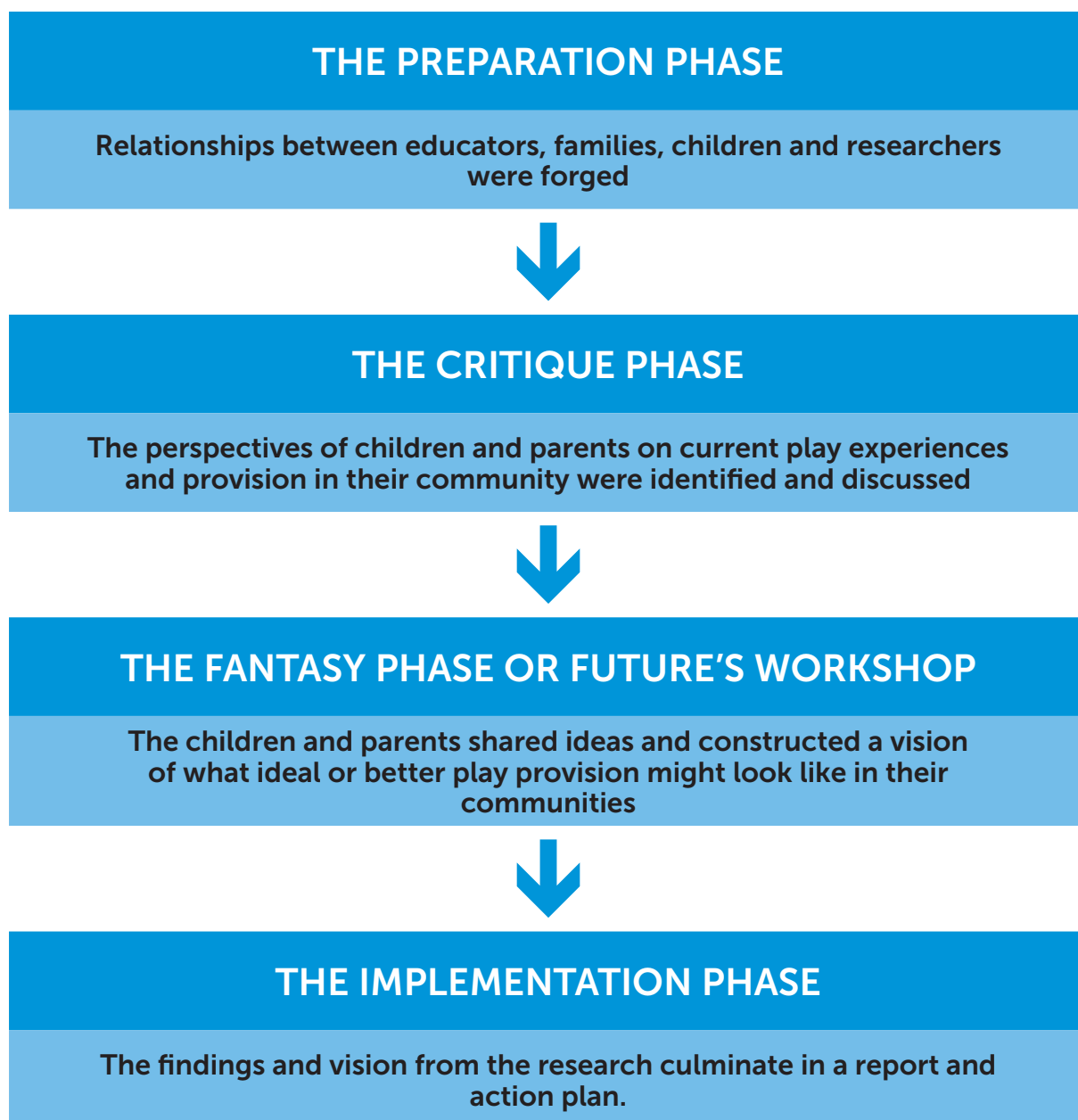


Diagram C: Four Phases of a Future Workshop

Summary of the Futures Workshop

Phase 1: Forging relationships between educators, families, children and researchers timeline

Researchers met initially with the project manager of Hill Street FRC and subsequently with the Child and Family Team Leader of the Centre and the educators working directly with the children. Time was spent with the educators, discussing play within the Centre, which provided an opportunity for shared values and understandings of play to emerge. As part of the research process, educators completed a baseline self-evaluation provided by the Aistear/Síolta practice toolkit to discuss play within the setting (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, (NCCA), n.d.).

Self-evaluation Tool
Learning Through Play (3-6 years)

AistearSíolta
Practice Guide

With the support of the manager and educators, the researchers met with the children and caregivers. The research team relied on the educators, who knew the children best, to explore their perspectives on play. In this initial phase, researchers met with the caregiver group on two occasions, firstly to provide a context for the study and to gain informed consent. To promote inclusion, information on the project was translated into the first language of the families attending Hill Street FRC. The educators identified 16 languages amongst the family groupings. The research team asked the parents to discuss play preferences at home with their children, to explore where children liked to play in their neighbourhood and to consider the barriers that exist. Art materials were provided to families and children to help express play preferences in a variety of ways.



Phase 2: Gathering perspectives on current provision and children's play preferences



In this phase of the project, researchers gathered the perspectives of children and parents on their assessment of play provision in their communities.

A variety of data sources and approaches were used to ensure the voices of children and their families were heard. Educators had authentically captured children's words and ideas relating to play over a number of weeks, listening to their views, which were shared through discussion and expressed through their mark making with paint, crayons, pencils and play dough. Parents gathered and shared stories, photographs and their children's art (mark making) to highlight play preferences, that is where, how and with whom children enjoyed playing. A small focus group discussion was held with parents to explore more deeply their perspectives and experiences on play in the community and to gain insights to the barriers they encounter in finding safe, appropriate and stimulating places for their children to play.

The richness of play provision in the Centre as evidenced through the self-evaluation tool; the perspectives of children as gathered by the educators and parents through discussion, photographs and art (mark making); and the insights from parents were analysed and themed to inform Phase 3 of the research project.

Phase 3: Creating a vision for children's play - Future Thinking Workshop

Using all of the data gathered in the previous phases, the researchers designed a Future Workshop, which took the form of a play event. The workshop or play event took place outdoors in an expansive green space on the university campus. Play stations were set up with open-ended materials, construction equipment and animals (petting farm), all of which the children had identified as being important to their play.

Children and families from both settings were invited to spend time engaging with the space and the materials. As the children played, researchers captured their preferences through photographs and informal conversations with them and their parents.

The objective in this phase was to support and enable children and families to create a vision for play and opportunities they would like in their communities. The challenge for the researchers was to create the context and conditions that would encourage children to express their play preferences and that could be interpreted authentically.

In the course of the morning, everyone came together indoors to relax, share food and begin the process of imagining or designing their ideals of play. A Play Officer from Dublin City Council and a Local Councillor joined the gathering, engaging in informal conversation around play experiences with families and children. Views and visions were collated, analysed and themed. It is these perspectives that inform this report.

Phase 4: Presenting Findings

Perspectives from each phase of the research project informed the creation of a utopian future play space as imagined by the children and families. The final stage of a Future Workshop is to review the vision created by the research participants and to consider what practical steps can be taken to realise the plan, in this case for a utopian play space.

Findings from this report were informed by the data that was gathered and the vision that was developed by children and parents. The researchers, manager of Hill Street FRC, educators, children and families reviewed the draft report and agreed on the final layout and recommendations. This report belongs to the management, educators, children, parents, and caregivers of Hill Street FRC.

It is hoped that this report may be used as a resource in highlighting their needs to Dublin City Council, local councillors and politicians, as they continue to advocate for children and families in the community.



Chapter 3

Findings

This section of the report echoes the opinions of children and families on play provision in their communities. Feedback from the children and families highlight the affordances of play in their communities and the barriers they encounter as they go about their daily lives in Dublin city centre. Finally, the report reflects a vision of play spaces proposed and designed by the children and parents.

Findings are presented under three themes:

	THEMES	SUBTHEMES
THEME 1	Children's Play Preferences	• Spaces where friendships and connections can be made in the community • Spaces to engage with nature and natural resources • Spaces to engage with animals • Spaces that have opportunities for freedom, movement, speed and, risk
THEME 2	Perspectives on Current Play Provision in Dublin City	• Space to live and play • Private spaces • Interacting with animal • Public amenities • Parents critique of Dublin Parks provision • Limitations of play • Risky play
THEME 3	Play spaces designed in collaboration with children and their families	• Setting up the play space • Children interacting & exploring play resources • Designs created • Children and families utopian park design

Diagram D: Themed Findings

THEME 1: Children's Play Preferences

Children engaging with this project were aged 2.5 – 6 years of age and were confident in sharing their play preferences with the research team. They privileged outdoor play and valued spaces in the community where they could meet the same children on a regular basis, enabling them to make friends and together pursue their interests through play.

The children reflected a strong desire to connect with nature and to play with natural materials such as sand, water, stones, sticks and leaves. However, they also wanted opportunities to move freely, to experience speed and risk on bicycles (scooters) and on fixed equipment such as swings. Living in apartments leaves little opportunities for family pets, but this was important to the children in the study, who want to come close to animals. There was also a sense that children enjoy the freedom of having open spaces to run and chase but also in having spaces that feel private to them.

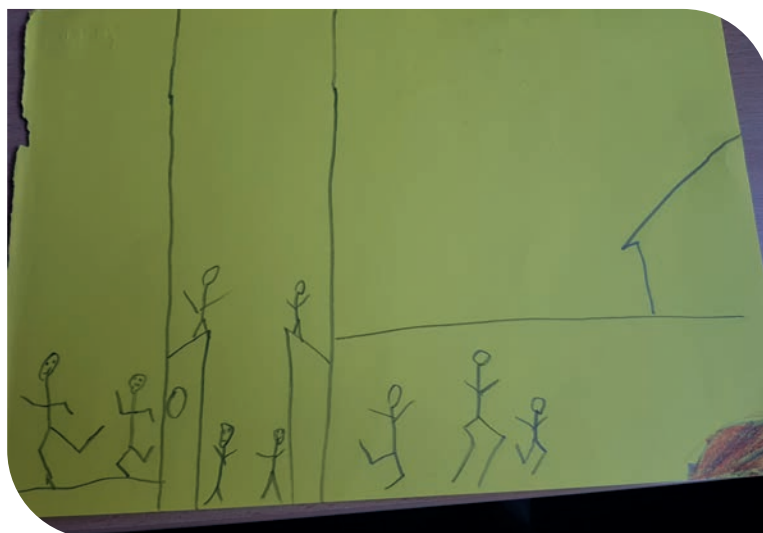


In keeping with the ethos and project aim, the researchers were conscious that the opinions of the children and parents were authentically presented. Consequently, the following section highlights the themed play preferences of children (**green font**), and their parents/caregivers (**purple font**) through words and drawings.

Sub Theme 1: Spaces where friendships and connections can be made in the community

Comments from the children highlight the power of outdoor play to enable connections with nature but also connections with others.

In this picture, the child describes playing with friends in Grangegorman Park



When we are in the park, he encourages other children in the playground to chase him but he will not share the ball with them. It's a good place for him to meet others.

I like making new friends in the playground.

He loves to meet other kids in the park - he loves playing with other kids and share small cars and chucks.

Parents also highlight the social aspect of the park.

When discussing play, parents would often reflect back to their own experiences of play and the lack of limitations placed on them. They recalled the sense of community spirit with a sense of shared responsibility and yearn for some of this for their own children. Another mother, misses being able to live her life with her family outdoors, as they live in an apartment with little space and no access to outdoor or communal space.

When I was young, we were allowed to play all day outside and mother would tell us to come back in time for dinner. However, it was summertime and the evenings were bright. We, as a group of young children, forgot about time and when we arrived home thinking it might be dinner time, it was 10.00pm and the family were all concerned and out looking for us. At that time there was a sense of safety and lot of communal care, mothers looking out for other children.



Sub-theme 2: Spaces to engage with nature and natural resources

Sand stood out as the favourite play resource for children with sticks, stones, mud and water also featuring.

In this picture the child describes their trip to the beach, and playing with their brother, Mother and Father.



Ballsbridge Park,
playing with the
sand.

My favourite place
to play is the beach.

We get buses to
bring her places
where there is sand
to play with.

He needs to see everything and touch everything. He soon gets bored with the equipment in the playground. He just likes to play with sand. Even when we are at home, he draws the sand and the slides. I go by bus to Ballsbridge as it is really nice, and the sand is good.



Some pictures of my boys' favourite things (besides climbing and riding their bikes) - they are all about sand, sticks, stones and mud.

What I miss most for my two boys in Ireland is sand (sand pits) and parks where they have water available all the time.

The boys just like to run a lot and collect sticks and stones.

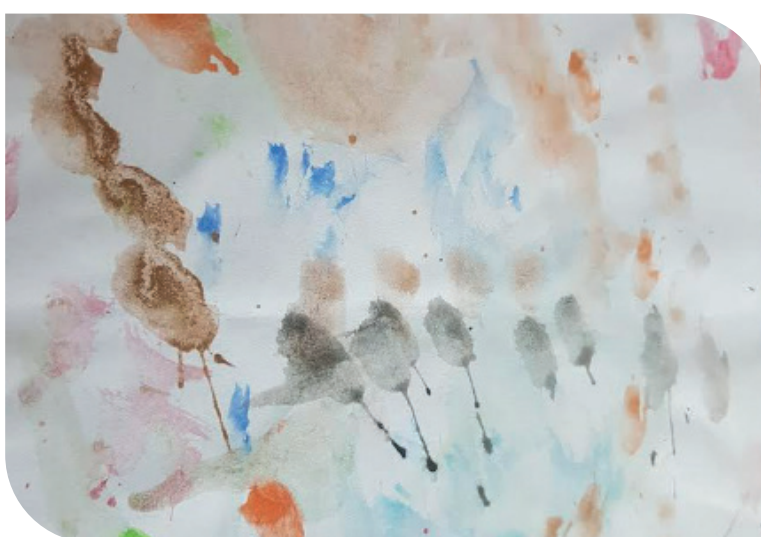


They love finding and playing with sticks and to run around. My children are happy when they are outside playing with whatever is around, even mud.

Sub Theme 3: Spaces to engage with animals

Dogs, ducks and swans were common themes from children and adults.

In this picture, the child has drawn paw prints and describes it as a dog playing with a ball



I like to see the birds making arrows (flying in formation).

I would like to ride a fast horse.

Outside I can look at swans and play.

He really likes to look at the ducks and he really loves dogs and playing with dogs. Sometimes I have to bring him to Drumcondra Park so he can play with the dogs that are being walked early in the morning before he comes to preschool.

She loves being close to nature and loves chasing the pigeons and watching the ducks.

His best friend is my sister's dog.

Sub Theme 4: **Spaces that have opportunities for freedom, movement, speed and, risk**

The stories from parents and children reflect the importance of movement and freedom to use large spaces and engage in risky play.

This image reflects the child's words 'I like to cycle my bike to exercise my legs'.



When we go to the park, she likes to go on her scooter and to bounce on the bouncy ball.

We can go high and jump off the swings. I like the swings because they go really fast.

My son likes to play football with his friends in Grangegorman park, slides on the high slides and runs around. He just loves to climb trees in the park.

My son will only spend 5 minutes in a playground and does not go near the equipment that is there. He prefers the freedom of running and playing with his ball. He loves nature, but he also enjoys having 'nets' when playing football. He just wants to run; he needs lots of space outdoors. He adores animals and he loves to play with the dogs in the park and sometimes chase them if he can. He spends a lot of time looking at things. More than anything, he loves his football, he brings it everywhere. He loves to find sticks and play with them. It's the best part of the day when he finds a stick!

THEME 2: Parent and Children's Perspectives on Play Provision in Dublin City

In this section, parents and children express the need for neighbourhood spaces that are safe, organised and provide opportunities for play. They identify the barriers they encounter in current public provision, as they travel and seek out good places for their children to play.

Sub Theme 1: Space to live and play

Children and parents problematise the spaces for living and playing.

While drawing this picture the child expresses their frustration using the following words

'I like playing with my car. This is a road with a car and 2 roundabouts and 2 dead-ends. Mammy won't allow me play outside'



I live in the flats
and I like playing
football but I can't!

I have a flying pixie
fairy too, but I don't
play with it on the
balcony because
it might fly away. I
can only play with
it in my Nanny's
garden.

I play on the
balcony but I need
more room on my
balcony so I can
play with my cousin.

Parents' thoughts on living and play space

We live in an apartment complex (4 buildings with an inner open space). The signs say 'no balls', 'no bikes', 'no on the grass' - why can the children not play outside their homes and meet other children in the neighbourhood?

Messy play in an apartment is not possible and certainly, no water play.



I think what is needed, in addition to playgrounds, are many small places to play, maybe near the apartment. This would allow the children to get to know other children from the same area.

As a child in Egypt (Cairo) we had a roof garden and we made dens to protect ourselves from the heat. We need to use available space for the children to play.

My little one has a chalk board at home and loves to draw on it, both children love to draw on paths with chalk, but we can't do that outside our apartment.

Sub Theme 2: Private spaces

Parents recognise the need for a sense of privacy in play.



Here in Dublin, there are no outside private play spaces, where children can be supervised but where they can have a sense of privacy.

In the apartment, the children love playing dens indoors - they put up sheets and blankets across the back of chairs, but it is not as good as playing outside.

They also like some private spaces and this we do not find in the parks.

Sub Theme 3: Interacting with animals

Animals are a common theme from children and parents, who recognise that having pets is not possible in apartment living.

We are not allowed to keep pets in the apartment.

All that is possible are stuffed animals at home.

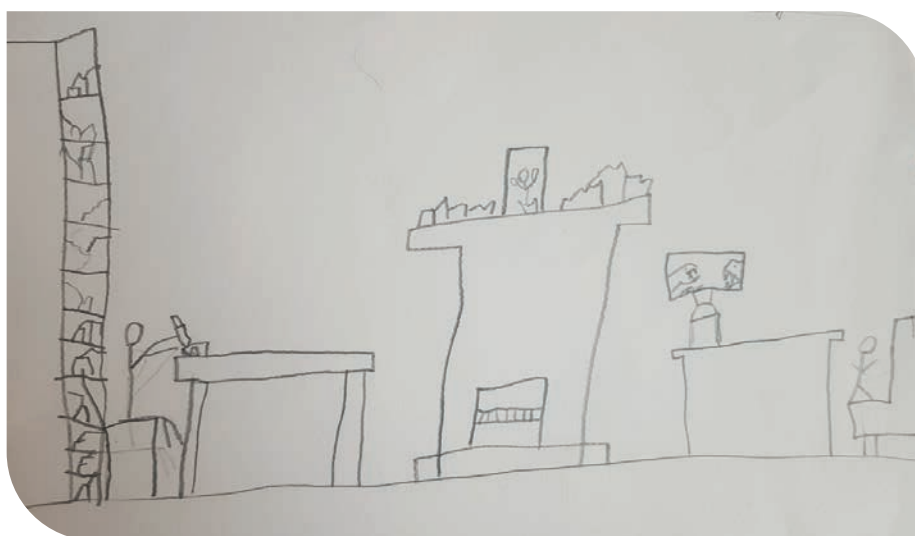


Sub Theme 4: Public amenities

The public amenities, parks, zoo and museums are well known to the group of parents in Hill St. They travel long distances on public transport with small children, buggies and bags. In the absence of play spaces outside the apartments, parents are resourceful and utilise what amenities are available. They know what is important for their children.

We will always travel at the weekends to bring our daughter to good play areas. She also gets to meet other children.

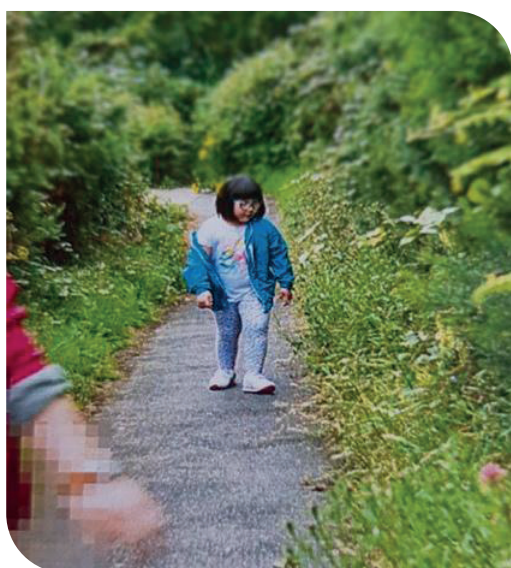
My son loves to draw and spends a lot of time drawing dinosaurs. We have missed being able to go to the natural museum and the zoo and we look forward to visiting them when they open up fully.



Drawing dinosaurs at home

Parents critique of Dublin Parks provision

Parents explore a wide number of parks with their children in order to access quality play environments. Parents were very clear on the parks they preferred and the reasons why.



The little girl in the picture asked her mother to include the photo taken in Killiney park as it is her favourite park. They both love the park because it is so natural and a little wild in places.

Best park ever is in Ballsbridge, it has a large sand pit, but also pulleys and cogs with buckets. The children play for hours!

Fairview Park, Sandymount Park, Ballsbridge Park and Merrion Sq. are also very good parks.

Great parks here in Dublin are Ringsend and Sandymount parks. Sandymount is very inclusive and caters for a mix of ages. The park has music (xylophones), trampolines, a climbing tower which facilitates an adult and child to climb together (Lighthouse), hills to go up and down, see-saw where a child and an adult can sit in a net at either end of the see-saw.

In contrast, parents explain how their local parks in inner city Dublin do not meet their needs.



Around the St. James St. area, no playground is safe. There have been small fires lit in the playground are there are burnt out areas. The playground is dirty and not good for small children. I wish they would keep the play areas close to our apartment clean.

Mountjoy Sq. Park is the closest to me, but I do not like it because of the drunks, beggars and street boys. It feels dangerous for me and for my boys.



Best park ever is in Ballsbridge, it has a large sand pit, but also pulleys and cogs with buckets. The children play for hours!

Limitations of Play in the Park

Parents value the public parks as these are the main and sometimes only designated spaces where their children can play, but there are limitations.

Risky Play

One parent highlights the limitations placed on her and her children when engaging in risky play and using natural resources outside the boundaries of the playground area.

My boys favourite outdoor play is climbing trees. People sometimes come up to me and say that it is dangerous, and they should come down. They can climb quite high. Other people seem nervous to look at them but I know that my boys are capable climbers. I sometimes feel annoyed and maybe embarrassed when people say this to me and so I get the boys down. I have been told 'they are not allowed to climb trees there is a playground over there for them to use'. They just love climbing trees. I have always encouraged that because I loved it myself as a child.



Parents went on to highlight other resources they felt were important and necessary in parks to support children to engage in play.

We need places that children can explore, places with trees and long grass.

Why can't we have little gyms and small basketball hoops and football nets?

There should be little private houses or dens in the park, in which the children can play and have a sense of privacy.

Not many areas that have access for children to play with water - water appears to be off limits but they love it.

There is not enough for the small child. All the park equipment is for older ones. What about small nets for the younger group? My younger son who is 2 ½ years loves being outside and likes to stop and look at things and touch things. He loves water and will play with it anywhere, if there is a puddle, he will sit in it. He loves being close to nature, chasing the pigeons and watching the ducks.

Parents were travelling long distances to get to the parks they felt provided the best quality play provision and promoted inclusion.

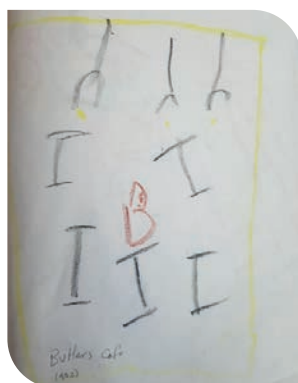
My child has autism, and he loves playing - he is interested in repetition in play, cause and effect, play and movement (up and down in particular). He needs play opportunities so that he can socialise better with other children. When he goes to a park (we go to Sandymount a lot) he observes and then follows or copies what the other children do. In this way he learns how to get into the play. Once he has seen children playing with a particular piece of equipment (e.g., xylophone) he will only go back to that equipment when others are present. He needs other children to play with him and it is not always possible to travel distances to get to Ringsend and Sandymount.

Preparing to spend the day with their children in the park requires planning and the parents included some practical recommendations for consideration:

There are many playgrounds in Dublin and that is good, but the playgrounds themselves are bad. There are no bathrooms. There should be bathrooms (clean and free) in every park.

With the weather in Ireland, every park should have outdoor protected (courtyard like) spaces.

The children always want to go to Butlers' Café, because sometimes they get a free chocolate and nice little forks and for me it is somewhere indoors to bring them. A little place in the park, maybe not Butlers, to get coffee and juice would be good.



Children's drawings of Butlers Café

THEME 3: Play spaces designed in collaboration with children and their families

In this final phase of the data collection, the researchers set up a play space on the ground of St Patricks Campus in Dublin City University informed by the play preferences noted by children and their parents. The children, along with their families and educators were invited to come to the campus, explore the play space and engage with the materials. The day ended in St Patricks with a sharing of food and discussion which helped to design future play spaces.

Sub Theme 1: Setting up the play space

The researchers drew on the identified play preferences of children and parents when preparing the outdoor play space. A mix of natural, found and open-ended materials were included along with animals from a mobile petting farm, which proved to be a real success.



Sub Theme 2: Children interacting and exploring play resources

During the morning, children moved freely between the play stations. Many children remained immersed in their preferred play areas, constructing towers, pouring water, mixing sand and stirring stones. Parents and educators remained on the edges of play, watching the children, responding when necessary and engaging with the researchers. The team of researchers from DCU and Maynooth University observed the children, noting their interests through their words, body language and levels of engagement with the materials and animals.



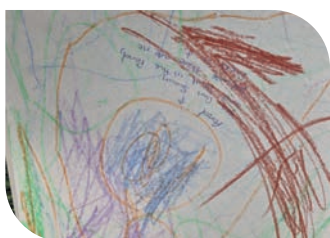
The verdict as summarised by one young boy at the end of the morning was that it was

'The best day ever'

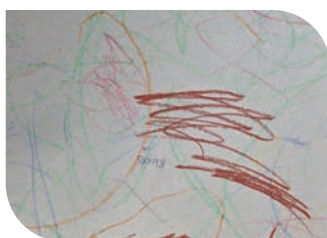
Sub Theme 3: Designs created

Following the time spent exploring and engaging with the resources provided, everyone moved inside to share some food and come together. Drawing materials and photos were laid out on tables and on the floor for easy access. Parents and researchers talked with the children, inviting them to design a play space, to indicate what they would like to play with all the time.

The following are some samples of the designs created.



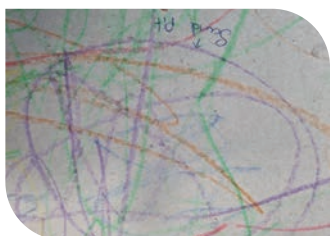
'A pond where you can swim and ducks in the pond'



'Blocks'



'Monkey bars'



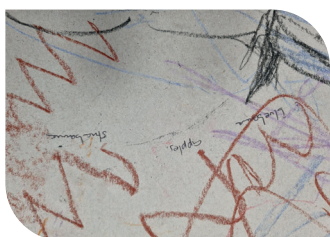
'Sand pit'



'Planks and tyres'



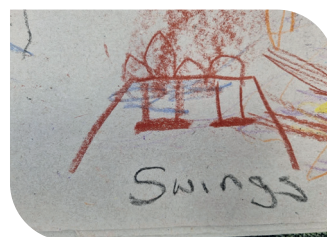
'Flowers'



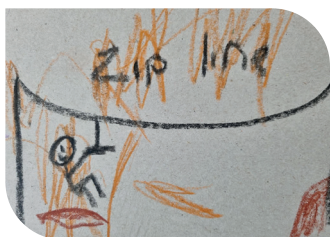
'Strawberries, apples, blueberries'



'Football'



'Swings'



'Zip line'



'Animals'

Sub Theme 4: Children and families utopian park design

The children and families engaging with the research have lived experiences of parks and utilising play spaces accessible to them. They shared insights and visions as to how they would ideally design play spaces in their areas. For parents, the location of play spaces and proximity to the apartments where they live is critical. There was a distinct preference for open, large spaces for children to be free but there was also a call for small or mini-spaces around the apartment blocks, where children could play safely and where parents could connect with neighbours.

Nature and natural materials are central to the design of the park or open play space. The park must provide access to sand, water, grass, trees and plants, with the preference that the various elements are laid out as they would be in the wild. Children demonstrated a strong affinity with nature, and a common planting and area would allow them to grow food and in time harvest and take it home for cooking and consumption.

Moveable loose parts, such as tyres, planks, stones, tubes, cardboard, logs, blocks are required in the play space to stimulate interests, encourage cooperation and allow for creativity and inquiry. Children's desire for access to animals and pets was a reoccurring theme, which was evident in the time they spent at the petting farm, fascinated in looking, and where possible touching the animals. Acoustic materials to create music and sound in open spaces were identified as being important to the children. While children were clear on their desire for natural and open-ended materials, they also highlighted structured features which included slides, swings, ziplines, climbing frames and dens as being required in their utopian play spaces. The accessibility of inclusive sports areas for all ages and abilities featured in children's drawings and parents' feedback. Practical requirements which enable play include, safety and cleanliness, universal access for all children, access to shelter for all, access to toilets and nappy changing, benches and seats with access to refreshments.

Not a new ask

Hill Street FRC Family Resource Centre is located in north Inner-City Dublin. Adjacent to the centre is a concrete play area, which offers few play opportunities and is an under-developed resource for the children and families in the area. A utopian designed playground has long been developed by the team, children and parents in Hill St. Family Resource Center to transform this space into a welcoming play place. Many of the design elements in the 10-year-old plan align with the findings from this study.



The 10-year-old plan and the findings from this study both emerge from the voices and perspectives of children, families and staff in Hill Street FRC. The manager and the team continue to advocate for the realisation of their plan for the play space on their doorstep and for a new purpose built Child and Family Centre.

CHAPTER 4

Recommendations & Conclusions

The aim of using a Future Workshop model is twofold, firstly, that local residents, in this case children and families, come together and jointly design a utopian play space that meets their needs. Secondly, they consider the long and short-term steps that can be taken to realise their vision. What has been achieved through this study is that the quiet and unheard perspectives of parents and children in an urban area of Dublin City have emerged strongly and now need to be heard. When implemented, the practical recommendations identified in this study will transform the daily lives and experiences of children and families who use play spaces in the north inner city.

Recommendations

1 Establish Park Ranger roles

Parents in this study highlighted the contrasting quality and provision of parks in the city and outer suburbs. While diversity of provision is good, a stark difference is noted between the descriptions of parks in the centre of the city compared to those located in the suburbs. A basic requirement for families is for the park to be safe and clean, which was not always evident from the parents' perspective. More resources are required to achieve a basic level of safety and cleanliness in city centre park spaces. This could be achieved through the establishment of Park Ranger roles, potentially through Employment Activation schemes. In addition, a phone helpline to report dangerous activities or issues relating to the maintenance of the park could be made available for families. Signs with the contact number could be installed in all parks so that 'it shouldn't feel dangerous for me and my boys', parents would have a safety net.

2 Provide hygiene facilities in public parks

Public parks are a public good and are provided to encourage all the community to engage in outdoor activities, providing much needed free recreational space. The provision of toilets, nappy changing areas, hand washing facilities along with access to refreshments and shelter are very basic yet extremely important features, which would allow parents and children spend extended periods of time in parks. This is especially relevant where not all apartments have outdoor communal spaces.

3 Re-wild traditional playgrounds

Removing rubber matting and steel structures and returning traditional playgrounds to a natural state would not only support the main features requested by children and families, but would support the achievement of Global Sustainable Development Goal 11, sustainable cities and communities, (UN, n.d.). The Liberties Greening Strategy (Dublin City Council, 2015) resulted in the opening of Bridgefoot Street Park with an emphasis on nature. Recommendations from Child Poverty Monitor signposts the need to emulate this model and set aside funding for the City Council to support similar development (CRA, 2022).

4 Re-claim and develop pocket play spaces

While the preference of parents and children emerging from this study is for large outdoor natural spaces, the reality is in Dublin City space is limited. Despite the pressure of available space in the city, new building continues with seven out of 10 new housing units under construction in Dublin are now apartments (Weston, 2022). Under state planning guidelines from 2001, creche/play facilities must be included in all new residential building projects of 75 units. However, a recent study undertaken by the Business Post (Woods, 2022) highlighted that a third of all large-scale apartment projects submitted to An Bord Pleanála in 2021 had no childcare facilities included in the design. So, while the construction of apartments continues in the city, there appears to be little evidence of design considerations for children and families. This study is emphatic that future apartment developments in Dublin City should have planning requirements for the provision of natural green communal spaces for play and family recreation both indoor and outdoor. Signs restricting play in apartment grounds should not be permitted and the use of apartment rooftops as communal spaces for play should be considered.

This study highlights the need of children and families for natural play opportunities close to home. The value of small play spaces cannot be under-estimated. Pockets of derelict and under-developed spaces in the North Inner-City area, close to where families live, could be re-claimed, and re-planted with designs that support play.

5 Provide accessible loose parts for play

The availability of loose parts extends children's play opportunities and promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills. As evidenced from the Future Workshop, loose parts are inexpensive and support the up-cycling of materials. Introducing loose parts would require the provision of storage containers along with the establishment of a Play Officer or Park Ranger role. The role of Play Officer was introduced in Northern Ireland, as someone who can provide access to loose parts at certain times of the day and replenish stocks.

6 Enable contact with animals

The benefits of child-animal connections (Melson & Fine, 2015) are well recognised and parents in this study lamented the absence of animals in the lives of their children. Because animals (domestic and wild) featured in the children's feedback the research team endeavoured to meet this need as part of the Future Workshop. Providing access for children to interact with animals was a challenge for the researchers when designing the play space. However, sourcing a mobile farm ensured children had opportunities to see and interact with a wide variety of animals. The creation of a partnership between Dublin City Council and owners of mobile farms could create regular access to animals for children in the city areas. A rota could be developed whereby the mobile farm would visit certain parks on certain days of the week. Alternatively, Dublin City Council could secure funding to create and manage a council owned mobile farm, in much the same way that South Dublin County Council manages the Fettercairn Youth Horse Project

It is clear that the lived experiences of children and families in this study provide a form of tacit knowledge that needs to be heard. The recommendations arising from this study have been made previously in different contexts. However, this study is significant in the inclusion of perspectives of very young children and their parents.

Conclusions

Working with the staff team, the children and parents in Hill Street FRC has re-affirmed that participation and the active involvement of families is critical to the process of designing play spaces, which they are familiar with and regularly use. Children and families are the experts in the matters of parks and play provision in their communities. This study highlights that in creating authentic opportunities for active participation and local decision-making in matters that directly impact on them, parents and young children in this marginalised community are committed to advocating for play spaces that are fit-for-purpose.

The families in this study have identified the play requirements that will improve the well-being and development of their children and of others in the wider community. If the tacit knowledge shared by the children and families, within this report were to be implemented, not only would it improve the quality of urban play spaces, it would also bring additional benefits, namely, stronger communities through communal play spaces and global citizenship education, as children learn to grow food, care for animals and the local environment.

Recommendations from the study support the implementation of the UNCRC, ensuring the voices of very young children, are heard, and listened to in the matter of play and recreational opportunities (UNCRC, 1989). Adopting the recommendations of parents and children from Hill Street FRC will support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 11, Sustainable Cities), (UNESCO, 2015), making Dublin City Centre a more attractive place for families to work and live. Closer to home, these recommendations have the possibility to contribute to the long-term objectives stated in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, that aims to,

'Make Ireland the best small country for children to grow up in' (DCYA, 2014).

Highlighting the need for regeneration of the play spaces located in Hill Street FRC has been ongoing for over 10 years. The children, families and educators of Hill Street FRC have taken time to share their knowledge and insight and hope this report will provide the additional impetus, motivation and rationale required to move from consultation to action and prioritise funding to commence regeneration of much needed play spaces.

We hope that all those who have taken the time to read this report will join us and together move hope into reality.

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