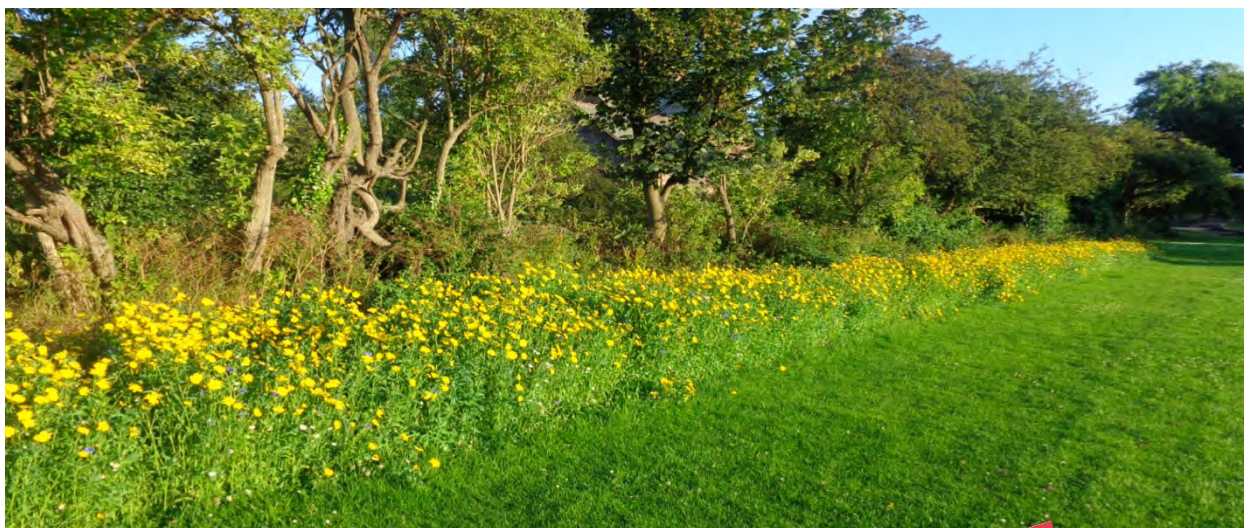


State of Play in the UK

Parks & Leisure Australia (Victoria /Tasmania)

Greg Maddock Memorial Scholarship 2014



State of Play in the UK

An Australian Perspective

In July 2014 as recipient of the Parks & Leisure Australia (Vic / Tas) Greg Maddock Memorial Scholarship I was fortunate to travel to the United Kingdom to investigate the state of play provision and cooperation amongst recreational providers and peak bodies. This involved meetings with organisations that support the play and parks sector, Local Government Authorities (LGA), designers and suppliers of play equipment and site visits. These meetings and visits allowed me to gain an insight into the history and how the play sector is currently organised and supported in the UK, valuable to me professionally in my roles as President of Play Australia, Open Space Coordinator for Maroondah City Council in Victoria and member of the Open Space Planners Network (PLA).

I started my investigation in Edinburgh, Scotland, which was to serve as my home base for the month, by meeting Margaret Westwood who is Secretary of the International Play Association (IPA World), Chair of IPA Scotland and Senior Play Development Officer for Edinburgh City Council. Margaret was able to give me a concise history and relationship between the IPA internationally, the Scottish branch and with Play Scotland, the NGO that supports the play sector locally. There has been considerable progress made in Scotland to develop policies, action plans, with supporting research and documentation. This has been strongly supported by the Scottish Government, in particular the Minister for Children, Children's Commissioner and the Chief Medical Officer.

Much of this support has come about due to the need to address significant areas of social disadvantage in many areas of Scotland, often caused by high levels of unemployment brought on by industrial decline, especially in the central belt of Scotland and rural areas.

IPA Scotland provides local members of IPA a forum and resources to spread the word on the child's right to rest, leisure and play as outlined in Article 31 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The General Comment that was released in 2013 by the UN sets out the importance of Article 31 to children and young people and obligation of governments to make progress in implementing the "Article 31 rights". IPA Scotland has produced publications and run training sessions to educate members and the wider play sector on how to promote and implement the Rights of the child.

They have also been instrumental in the development of a National Play Policy and Action Plan which has been adopted by the Scottish Government. The vision is "we want Scotland to be the best place to grow up. A nation which values play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all our children and young people; in their homes, nurseries, schools and communities."

They have also worked in conjunction with the Scottish Children's Parliament to consult with children about what play means to them and how it could be improved. The report "I'd play all day and night if I could" highlights the importance of being able to play with others but also alone if they choose without too many restrictions from adults, particularly around safety. Play can occur anywhere and should not be restricted to designated playspaces, centres or educational facilities. Children want more time for free play at home and school, rather than

too many structured activities and busy schedules. A few key statistics from the consultation results included:

- Only 21% of the children thought they needed toys to play
- Only 35% of the children felt happy and safe playing in the street
- Only 45% felt that adults thought it was important that they played
- 54% of the children didn't feel they had a local park they could play in



Play Scotland's Chief Executive Marguerite Hunter Blair explained that the development of the National Play Strategy has been a long term goal of the organisation and was hasten by the release of the UN General Comment. The majority of the Action Plan has been completed or well underway. The Scottish Parliament has recently commissioned an audit of all forms of inclusive play to better understand what is available and what needs to be done to improve access for all in the community. Play Scotland has also undertaken or collaborated on significant pieces of research that support the arguments for better play provision and how it can be achieved. These include a report on concerns and creative play

practice developed by the play sector called "Acorns and Conkers" and "Getting it Right for Play - the power of play: an evidence base", which is a guide for Local Authorities to help improve the design and provision of places and spaces for all children.

There is close collaboration between the many different organisations involved in the play sector in Scotland, due partly to the small population, limited large cities and a shared passion for play. It is also interesting to note that many complementary sectors such as health, housing, arts and cultural are heavily involved in promoting the right to play and collaborating with the play sector. Considerable funding has been provided through grants from the National Lottery, Scottish Government and private philanthropic organisations. However this funding is not always reliable and as most play organisations rely on core government funding they have little resources if this is not forthcoming.

Play Wales has recently faced a serious funding crisis when the core government funding was given to another play organisation, resulting in the redundancy of 12 staff and significant reduction in services. Mike Greenaway, their Executive Director felt that this was the result of new funding guidelines and not a reflection on past performance. Play Wales has been long considered a world leader in the development of policies, programs and services that have supported thousands of play workers around this small country. Unlike Play Australia which generates a quarter of its income from membership fees the UK equivalents are either very low cost or free to join and thus rely on other sources such as training fees and grants. They are all registered as charities to gain access to grants and tax concessions. The operating budgets of the national organisations like Play Scotland and Play Wales have been significant more than Play Australia, employing many full time staff and casual play workers.

Unfortunately I was unable to meet with anyone from Play England as they no longer have any permanent staff due to lack of funding and organisational dysfunction. In the past Play England have produced some significant documents that are used across the play sector internationally and include the recently updated "Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide", Play England, 2012, which promotes acceptable risk taking in the design of public playspaces and has helped authorities to provide more challenging and fun spaces against a tide of conformity and regulation.

All of these organisations and many others including the National Trust, Learning through Landscapes, (Grounds for Learning in Scotland), Woodlands Trust, Fields in Trust, English, Scottish and Welsh Natural Heritage bodies, and the Forestry Commission are strongly advocating for natural outdoor play and are actively promoting and providing these opportunities. Project Wild Thing, the documentary and now movement to get children outside in the natural environment, was supported by many of these organisations.



Many local authorities alongside these national organisations have developed some innovative natural spaces that the whole community

can enjoy, not just children. Unfortunately there are also a few examples where this innovation has failed due to lack of support and ongoing maintenance by authorities. Some Councils are driven by tight budgets and lack of staff expertise to make playgrounds 'bomb proof' those results in un-imaginative and sterile environments for children, that limits any real play value. Examples of this include the overuse of wet pour rubber softfall, lack of any vegetation, limited shade/shelter or use of landscape form. However there is a growing use of un-sawn timber posts in manufactured playgrounds and more use of creative landscaping. The use of rubber softfall matting that allows grass to grow through it was quite common especially in larger parklands which means equipment can be spread apart over a larger area and keeps the area green.



The fact that nearly all Council playgrounds are fully fenced doesn't help create a stimulating and varied environment. The push for fencing came from the Playing Fields Association who allowed one Committee member his leaving wish to set the guideline. Since then pressure from parents and also dog owners has made it very difficult for authorities to remove or not install fences, often taking up to 30% of the construction budget and high proportion of maintenance costs.



A few reports have supported the push for more natural play environments and there certainly appears to be a greater appreciation of the need to preserve green spaces that can be used for informal play as well as creating new areas. "Woodland Play" by the Learning through Landscapes organisation encourages schools to utilise nearby natural areas for informal play experiences. The many identified benefits include nurturing creativity and imagination; increased knowledge and skills; developing physical and emotional health; and improved behaviour and social skills. The issue of childhood obesity is a major concern in the UK as it is in Australia with the prediction 90% of Britons will be overweight by 2050.

One Scottish Council, North Lanarkshire has run a trial project in 3 primary schools to encourage the use of loose materials, with the report called "This place is like a building site". This project is part of ongoing work supported by the Scottish Government focussing on free play opportunities for 5-13 year olds and encouraging the better use of school outdoor environments with an emphasis on natural play. This project also provides training and resources to develop policies and management practices to foster more creative play and is supported by the organisation "Grounds for Play".

Most Councils in the UK have Open Space and Play Strategies /Development Programs and I was able to talk with key officers at Edinburgh, Dundee and Angus Councils about their successes to date, challenges and future aspirations. They all faced similar challenges and issues to those in Australia with a large number of ageing sites to manage that offer limited play value, limited budgets (often considerably less than Australian equivalents), need to provide greater inclusion for all in the community, vandalism and inappropriate use. A significant difference was the amount of community involvement in getting new projects started and seeking of funding from multiple sources such as Lottery Funds, philanthropic grants and commercial donors. Often Councils would just offer minimal seed funding to a community group to get a new or redeveloped site built. This partnership approach is probably necessitated by lack of Council / Government funding but certainly fosters greater community participation and brings a wide range of partners to the project, notably from the health and urban renewal sectors. New housing developments often require the developer to build and maintain the park and playground for up to 20 years.



The Edinburgh City Council Play Policy has a vision that "Edinburgh will be a child friendly city where all children and young people have access to play opportunities in a range of different settings which offer variety, adventure and challenges. They will be able to play freely and safely and make choices about where, how and when they play." This aim would be no different from many other cities around the world, how it is

delivered is the key point. In Edinburgh the Council employs two Play Development officers (it used to be a team of 10) who work with schools, kindergartens and other organisations to train play workers and teachers. They also broker funding for educational providers to improve their playspaces with an emphasis on natural play. One of the major public events that the Council organises is a Play Day as part of National Play Week, that is held in a busy pedestrian mall area, attracting hundreds of children and parents for an afternoon of mud, sand, water, physical, musical and constructive play.



Edinburgh City Council has developed a unique play value scoring system to rate their playgrounds with points awarded in 3 age groups on how well different activities and facilities are provided for. However there is a low score for natural play and landscape amenity compared to fixed equipment so that a natural play area would rate very low. It does give a starting point for assessing which sites require upgrading and needs to be viewed in context with the broader park environment and catchment area.

A number of Councils including Edinburgh and Stirling have implemented mowing and planting regimes in parks to encourage the growth of wild flowers, long grass labyrinths and mown paths. Whilst not directly related to play they do offer more attractive natural spaces for all the community to enjoy, at low cost and of great benefit to the flora and fauna.

Dundee City Council have a comprehensive "Outdoor Play and Youth Area Strategy 2009-2014", which looks at all avenues of play provision including mobile and outreach services, events, toy libraries, training and networks. Even though the Council has a landscape design unit of six staff they have very limited funds for development of playspaces and rely heavily on community fund raising, external grants and in kind support from businesses to deliver on their plans. The neighbouring Angus Council which covers a large rural area with a few small towns faces similar challenges but with even less funding. However both Councils have managed to create some wonderful spaces, especially in coastal parks, which feature extensive water play - a novelty in Scotland! Using creative design and local community support they are able to deliver imaginative spaces for children. There are still many poor quality playgrounds that need to be redeveloped but the same can be said for many poorer Council areas in Australia.



During my stay in the UK, I was very fortunate to be able to visit a hospice in Wales called Ty Hafan that provides respite care for severely disabled and terminally ill children and their families. They have recently opened a new playspace designed and built by Jupiter Play and furnished with many products from their sister company Inclusive Play. These items have been especially designed to cater for the needs of the disabled but at the same time would not look out of place in any public space. They provide a range of physical and sensory experiences that might not be available in regular playgrounds. Other companies have designed improved access to regular equipment like slides with side access points at the top and loading platforms at the bottom and even rope crawl access to upper decks.



The company has also worked in partnership with a children's charity (Kids) to develop an online assessment tool called "Plan Inclusive Play Assessment" (PIPA) which allows organisations to audit their own sites and rate their accessibility against a wide range of criteria. This information is presented on a public website and with a sign at approved playspaces informing users that it has met the inclusive criteria. This is

certainly a useful tool for carers and service providers wishing to locate suitable sites for visits.

The play equipment market in the UK appears to be dominated by a small number of local manufacturers who have been in business for many years and a wide range of imported items particularly from Scandinavia and Germany. There is extensive use of un-sawn timber to create a more natural effect, many distinctive rope based items and the traditional metal climbing units. There are a small number of youth specific items like seating, shelters and multi-purpose ball courts which are often fully fenced. The use of outdoor gym equipment is growing but didn't appear to be widespread and was generally located away from children's play equipment for safety reasons. Angus Council is planning to develop a Smartphone App that will allow users to track their exercise and customise programs through QR codes on their equipment, having built three extensive fitness stations around a lake.



In Scotland there is an annual award program for playspace design and initiatives that is administered by the Nancy Ovens Trust in recognition of the pioneering work in training and promoting the value of play by the late Nancy Ovens. These awards are well regarded and

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competitive, with a selection committee visiting each site or program that is nominated. The awards are held each September and hosted by the previous year's winner.

The integration of art and play is an area that is developing in the UK with many arts and cultural organisations working with more traditional play providers like Councils, play workers and training organisations such as Play Scotland and Play Wales. A few playgrounds have incorporated art in their design; a particularly good example is the Magnet Play site in Edinburgh that has giant traditional toys and sculptural items like spinning tops, hoops and chess pieces placed around it.

A fascinating art experience that also provided play opportunities was Jupiter Artland a private estate in West Lothian, near Edinburgh that has been developed over the last 10 years by the family owners. They have commissioned renowned artists to create unique sculptures and landscapes set in a woodland and fields surrounding the family home. The most outstanding feature is a series of spiralling grass mounds with ponds between them that create the entrance to the estate, designed by Charles Jencks. A large public park in Glasgow, Bellahouston has a sculptural park that provides many informal play experiences that are regularly changing.



After five weeks interviewing representatives of many organisations involved in play and recreation provision, visiting sites and reading publications produced by these and many other organisations that support the rights of the child to play it is clear that the play sector in the UK is in a strong position with a sound policy and research basis. There are many diverse organisations that support the play sector either directly like IPA, national play bodies as well as service providers like Councils, schools, early years centres along with organisations not always considered as being involved in play provision. They do seem to have close collaboration and networks that help them deliver a diverse range of services with minimal resources. However the lack or unreliability of ongoing funding, budget and staff cut backs has made it hard particularly for Councils to build and maintain attractive, creative and stimulating play environments. The play worker profession is very well recognised and supported with training but has to battle to maintain its position and viability. Working in aged care facilities during school hours and then with children out of school hours is one option being explored to provide full time employment.

There are some key points that have relevance for similar organisations engaged in providing and supporting play and outdoor recreation in Australia. Reliance on one source of funding, particularly

from Government is risky as Play Wales recently discovered and so multiple revenue streams need to be developed to ensure ongoing viability. This can be in the form of membership fees; training, conferences and seminars; alternative grants; and fund raising activities such as merchandise, sponsorship and publications.

The governance structure is key for the ongoing sustainability and development of a not for profit organisation. The most common that I observed is a Board of Directors of up to 10 members of the organisation, but gaining the right mix of skills and experience is critical to success along with a passion for the sector. Unfortunately organisations like Play England have struggled due mainly to organisation strife and lack of engagement with their membership.

There are a myriad of not for profit organisations in the UK engaged in the outdoor sector covering play, recreation, landscape design, arts, health and wellbeing that all seem to work together along with government agencies to gain better outcomes for their communities and the environment. However there will always be competition for funding and differing agendas that lead to factions.

In terms of Local Government delivery of services and facilities there are many similarities between the UK and Australia, however the emphasis in the UK seems to be more on policy, programs and events rather than the Australian focus on built facilities. The UK Authorities generally have more staff but less capital funding so playgrounds and other recreational facilities are often funded by small seed grants to community groups who then have to seek funding from sources such as the Lottery Fund, commercial and philanthropic groups. This appears to work quite well with numerous partners and strong community engagement in a project but may take some time to succeed. Councils in

the UK are facing ongoing funding cuts that will put more pressure on them in terms of service delivery.

Private property developers are now delivering more creative and extensive recreation facilities and are often required to maintain them for extended periods. Commercial and government owned visitor attractions are also developing entertaining playspaces that can cater for large numbers in a controlled environment, thus pushing the boundaries of design and regulations. Local government in the UK appear to be looking for more efficient and environmentally sound ways to deliver services whilst gaining greater community involvement. One small example of this is the use of wildflower meadows or borders in parks that are planted by community groups and require less maintenance than mowed grass areas.

The push towards providing more natural play and recreational opportunities and the greater use of professional designers, creative manufacturing and construction is certainly improving the quality of experience for all users, with additional benefits for the natural environment, reduced resources and cost. These are all ideas that can be implemented in Australia with minor modifications, especially where resources are limited.

I would like to express my thanks to all the organisations and staff who freely gave time to explain their work and show me some of the many great play and recreation opportunities that have been created around the country. Their shared passion for better communities shines through all the time. I also wish to thank Parks and Leisure Australia (Victoria / Tasmania) for the scholarship, which along with funding from Maroondah City Council and Play Australia allowed me to undertake this research.

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UK Play Organisations, Councils and Contacts

Margaret Westwood – Senior Play Development Officer, Edinburgh City Council, IPA Secretary, IPA Scotland Chair.

James Galloway, Senior Technical Officer, Parks & Greenspace, Edinburgh City Council

Andrew Shoolbread – IPA Scotland national representative, Nancy Ovens Trust Board Member

Theresa Casey - IPA World Chair

Marguerite Hunter Blair – Chief Executive, Play Scotland

Sharon McCluskie - Office & Information Manager, Play Scotland

Mike Greenaway - Chief Executive, Play Wales

Elizabeth Woodhouse, Team Leader Landscape Design, Dundee City Council

Nancy Ovens Trust Board Member

Paul Duncan - Landscape Technical Officer, Angus Council

Kristina Hinks - General Manager, Inclusive Play Ltd

Paul Pearson - Senior Designer, Jupiter Play Ltd

Jane Fortescue - Landscape Architect, Jupiter Play Ltd

Sites Visited

Edinburgh City Council:

West Princes Street Gardens

Saughton Park

Colinton Mains Park

Dalmeny Street Park

Barony Place Park

King George V Park

Magnet Play, The Meadows

Dundee City Council:

Broughty Ferry Castle Green

Dudhope Park

Angus Council:

Forfar Lake Regional Park

Forfar Creekside Park

Montrose Foreshore

Montrose City Park

Falkirk Council:
The Helix Regional Park

East Lothian Council:
Yellowcraigs Country Park
John Muir Country Park
Poulson Park, Tranent

Kendal Council:
The Adventure Park

Ty Hafan Children's Hospice, Barry, Wales

Jupiter Artland, Bonnington House, Kirknewton, Scotland

