

Introduction

In November 2021 Play England commissioned research into the spread of adventure playgrounds in England, with a view to updating and expanding on records compiled in 2017. This was both to update information held and to form the basis for an adventure playground network, which might offer a peer support mechanism as well as a means for Play England to assess needs and update the sector on government policy.

Methodology

The list compiled in 2017 contained the names of 147 adventure playgrounds, the region in which they were based and whether they were managed by the local authority, a voluntary or community sector (VCS) organisation or a hybrid of the two. Using this list as a basis, contact details for each playground were sought using internet searches for a website, Charity Commission and Companies House registers, a social media presence with recent posts (Facebook and Instagram). The majority of playgrounds had a website or social media page on which some contact details were displayed. Additional information, such as the need for children to be registered, the fact that the playground was staffed and open access, for example, were sometimes found this way too. Where the information was incomplete, an email was sent to a local authority or a phone call made to a play association or someone known to Play England in the locality and interviews undertaken. A search for other adventure playgrounds, not on the 2017 list, used the search term *adventure playground* on the internet and on the Charity Commission and Companies House websites.

Defining Adventure Playground

An assessment of whether the playground could be called an adventure playground or not was crucial to this research. Clearly, the playground needed to have outside space with some structures which afford playful behaviour. Many adventure playgrounds had started taking bookings from parents and children as a result of the need for distancing created by the Covid-19 pandemic, and so being 'open access', where children come and go as they please, could not be used as a criterion for being an adventure playground. Whether the playground was staffed or not seemed a good indicator to use – if unstaffed, the space could be deemed a fixed play area. Similarly, if staff were present but a cost for attending each session was levied, the playground could be regarded as childcare. As it is known, many adventure playgrounds have been forced to generate income to survive, and have started out of school clubs which offer childcare alongside open access sessions, so if there were staffed sessions that were free of charge at any time during the week, the setting was included in the list of adventure playgrounds.

Barriers to Data Collection

The Covid-19 pandemic slowed the research and made it a little more complicated than it might have otherwise been: staff in council departments with responsibility for play provision were often working from home, making phone contact difficult or impossible, as council offices/ council phones were not being staffed. In addition, some councils do not

publicise their telephone numbers on their website, making emails the only way to make contact. In some cases, three emails have been sent over the course of a month and still no response received. Some adventure playgrounds have a very low on-line profile, and several have no web presence at all, which necessitated phone calls with known local play associations or organisations which might provide contact details or up to date information about the playground. For a small number of playgrounds, the information available on websites and social media was very out of date, which required further investigation to establish the current operational status of the provision.

Of course, while some adventure playgrounds have been added to the list compiled in 2017, it is possible that there are some which have been overlooked, and so the findings of this research are not definitive. However, they represent a significant snapshot in time of the state of adventure playgrounds in England.

Findings and Comparison with 2017 results

The total number of adventure playgrounds identified during the course of the research was 125. The regional spread favours the south of England, with the overwhelming majority being in London, as might be expected. The north east has the fewest adventure playgrounds.

	2021	2017
South East	9	11
South West	12	12
East Midlands	11	10
Yorks & Humber	7	9
West Midlands	5	4
East	6	11
North East	1	2
North West	7	12
London	68	76
TOTALS	126	147

Fig 1: Number of Adventure Playgrounds by region in 2017 and 2021

The total number of adventure playgrounds in 2021 is down from the 147 playgrounds identified in 2017. As can be seen in the table above (Fig 1), only the south west has maintained the same number of playgrounds. The number of adventure playgrounds in the West and East Midlands appears to have risen, but the additional two playgrounds counted here were both active in 2017 and probably simply accidentally missed out of the research.

When speaking with local authorities and play associations, it emerged that several playgrounds had been closed because old structures had become rotten and needed replacing. In a small number of cases, the refurbishment was still expected. Some staffed adventure playgrounds had remained as unstaffed fixed play areas, open to the public round the clock. These tended to be local authority managed playgrounds in designated parks or public spaces, the playworkers having been made redundant as austerity measures struck and local authorities needed to make significant budget cuts.

Of the 126 playgrounds identified in 2021, only 28 were managed by local authorities and an additional 3 having a joint local authority / VCS management arrangement, termed a hybrid in this report. While the management of two is, to date, unknown, the remaining 93 playgrounds are VCS based. This is a significant difference from the situation in 2017, when 77 playgrounds were managed by local authorities, one fell into the hybrid category and 69 were VCS based (Fig 2). VCS can mean anything from a local neighbourhood trust or small play association to a chain of leisure centres, large sporting organisation or housing association.

The considerable transfer of management from local authorities to the voluntary and community sector suggests that local authorities were keen for adventure playgrounds to continue but had less capacity to provide staff and maintenance. Many of the VCS based adventure playgrounds continue to receive substantial grants from local authorities, and most supplement this with grants from trusts.

	Local Authority 2017	Local Authority 2021	VCS 2017	VCS 2021
South East	9	6	1	3
South West	2	0	10	12
East Midlands	1	3	9	8
Yorks & Humber	5	2	4	5
West Midlands	3	0	1	3
East	11	5	0	1
North East	2	0	0	0
North West	6	1	6	5
London	38	11	38	56
TOTALS	77	28	69	93

Fig 2: Number of Adventure Playgrounds by management responsibility in 2017 and 2021 (excluding hybrids and unknowns)

When looking for contact details and information about individual settings, it was noted that the information relating to their adventure playgrounds available on local authority websites was quite poor in many cases and, in a small number, none existent. Often, a playground might be listed on the Parks Department page of a council website, for example, but have no information about opening hours. Overall, the quality of adventure playground websites varied enormously in relation to the ease of finding contact details, the clarity of the aims of the playground and procedures for use.

Similarly, local authority managed playgrounds were less likely to have a social media presence than those which were VCS based. Many social media accounts were used solely to inform of events happening at a playground and how to book, whereas a small number also posted pictures of children playing, thanked funders for donations and showed photos of the products the funding brought. During the course of the research, one Facebook page was found which had been set up to share old photographs and reminisce about a playground which had closed down.

Information about funding was not available in the 2017 research, but searches in the Charity Commission entries for VCS adventure playgrounds in 2021 indicated success from a wide range of funding streams. As expected, adventure playgrounds were gaining funding from Lottery strands (mainly Reaching Communities, Awards for All), Children in Need, Comic Relief, Sport England and their local authority. Some were also generating income through fundraising events, hire of premises and lunch club, and a small number received interest on savings and gift aid on donations. Previous research by Play England indicates a substantial number of playgrounds gaining income through the Holiday Activities and Food programme.

Almost all the adventure playgrounds contacted required children to be registered with them, with a small number asking for a small donation annually. Children then either sign themselves in and out when attending, or in some instances, book in to attend. Advance booking is most likely to be a requirement at playgrounds catering specifically for children with additional needs.

During the course of the research, it was found that a new adventure playground is being planned in Crewe, in the north west, though it is still at the early planning stage so not yet open.

Though they were not asked explicitly for their views on joining a network, some staff contacted by phone expressed an interest in joining if one were set up. One playworker asked specifically for training in writing funding applications and where to find demographic information which might support funding bids, while one email respondent requested information on funding for renewal of structures in the playground.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that, in the last four years, 21 adventure playgrounds have been closed. This constitutes almost 15% of provision, a significant proportion, and is a worrying trend following the hope that Blair and Brown's governments generated in the early 21st century. The addition of a new playground in Crewe, when it is built, will be very welcome.

Recommendations

- Establishing a network would enable playgrounds to feel less isolated and more easily seek support to strengthen sustainability. It would provide a source of peer support and opportunities to share good practice, as well as a mechanism for Play England to alert playworkers about new government policies.
- Training in, or support for, website development would help adventure playgrounds raise their profile, to generate interest and promote their benefits to funders and the wider public.
- Support for and/or training in finding sources of funding and writing funding applications could contribute to financial sustainability for many playgrounds. This

should include where to source demographic data for neighbourhoods and ways in which data can be collected and managed by playworkers, to support funding applications.

- Similar research, undertaken at four or five year intervals, would enable further comparison, identify trends in playground development and provide the evidence on which to make the case for the development of play provision.

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