

Community Matters – Final Report

By Stacey Pottinger

1. Developing, Designing and Conducting the Research

1.1 The Question

Wansdyke Play Association worked with four researchers from the University of Bath to explore the impact that WPA's outdoor, outreach play services has on alleviating play deprivation across Somer Valley communities.

We began the process by defining this question as well as a series of sub questions:

- What are families' understanding of play? What are families' perceptions about the benefits of play? Do families value play? What are families' perceptions of the barriers to play?
- What are children's understanding of play? What are children's perceptions about the benefits of play? Do children value play? What are children's perceptions of the barriers to play?
- What are Play Workers' perceptions of the benefits and barriers of play in deprived communities? What role does/should play serve in the everyday lives of young people? Why is play important? In what ways can play facilitate positive change for young people? What is the role of the play assistant in facilitating play?

1.2 The Research Process

In designing the research, the collaborative team discussed the demographics of the local community and the various challenges and needs we may meet during the process. It was decided that to make the findings more detailed and meaningful we would take a multi-disciplinary approach to our research:

1. **Surveys** were used to explore the role of play before, during and after a 'play intervention'. The surveys were distributed to young people and parents/guardians.
2. **Observations** of the impact of the 'play intervention.' Observations took place before the play intervention commenced in order to ascertain how outdoor spaces in an identified area of deprivation was being used, or not. Observations then took place during the play intervention and again following the completion of the intervention to see whether the spaces was being used differently.
3. **Mobile methods** (go along interviews) with young people whilst engaged in play. 'Go along' interviews to explore young peoples' experiences of play combined with drawing, telling stories/role plays as well as just talking, playing and moving. These 'go along' interviews were conducted by University of Bath Researchers.

4. **Interviews/focus groups** with parents/guardians to explore perceptions of play and the role of play in the everyday lives of their children. These took place mid-way through the 'play intervention'. These focus groups were conducted by University of Bath Researchers.
5. **Reflective Diaries** were completed by Play Workers in order to record their experiences including, fears, anxieties, hopes, enjoyment as well as strategies that worked and why, interactions with young people and parents/guardians etc.

1.3 Defining Play and how WPA Play

As play is a 'slippery' concept which means different things to different people. The broad definition we chose to use for the purposes of the research is "To engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose".

It is also important to consider the specific approach to play that WPA adopt during our Community Play Ranger/Outreach sessions. At these sessions we provide outdoor, outreach play services which aim to support children to be physically active and develop social, emotional and problem-solving skills.

1.4 The Definition of Play Deprivation

Play Wales defines Play Deprivation as "... the name given to the idea that not playing may deprive children of experiences that are essential to their development and result in those affected being both biologically and socially disabled." As part of the process of understanding play deprivation as a concept WPA staff read articles around the subject from academics and play professionals to deepen their knowledge of the subject from previous studies, including studies looking at the behaviour of play deprived monkeys and children in Romanian Orphanages.

1.5 Facts and Figures – the Local Community

We chose to conduct our research during our outreach play sessions in an area of Writhlington called 'The Plantation'. We have worked in the area on and off for a number of years and there are members of the community who have regularly attended sessions, as well as many more families who have welcomed WPA support via our other services. As well as personal knowledge of the area, WPA staff conducted desktop research to determine some relevant statistics to further deepen our understanding of the issues faced by the local community.

77.4% (England average = 17.2%) of the area is considered to be hard-pressed living area which is defined as... "Mostly on the fringe of the UK's urban areas, particularly in Wales and the North of England. High levels of people in terraced accommodation, high unemployment, low ethnic diversity, high levels of people employed in manufacturing".

We looked, via the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, at the specific postcode within which the beneficiaries of the outreach play live and found that it sits high in many deprivation deciles once the data is broken down:

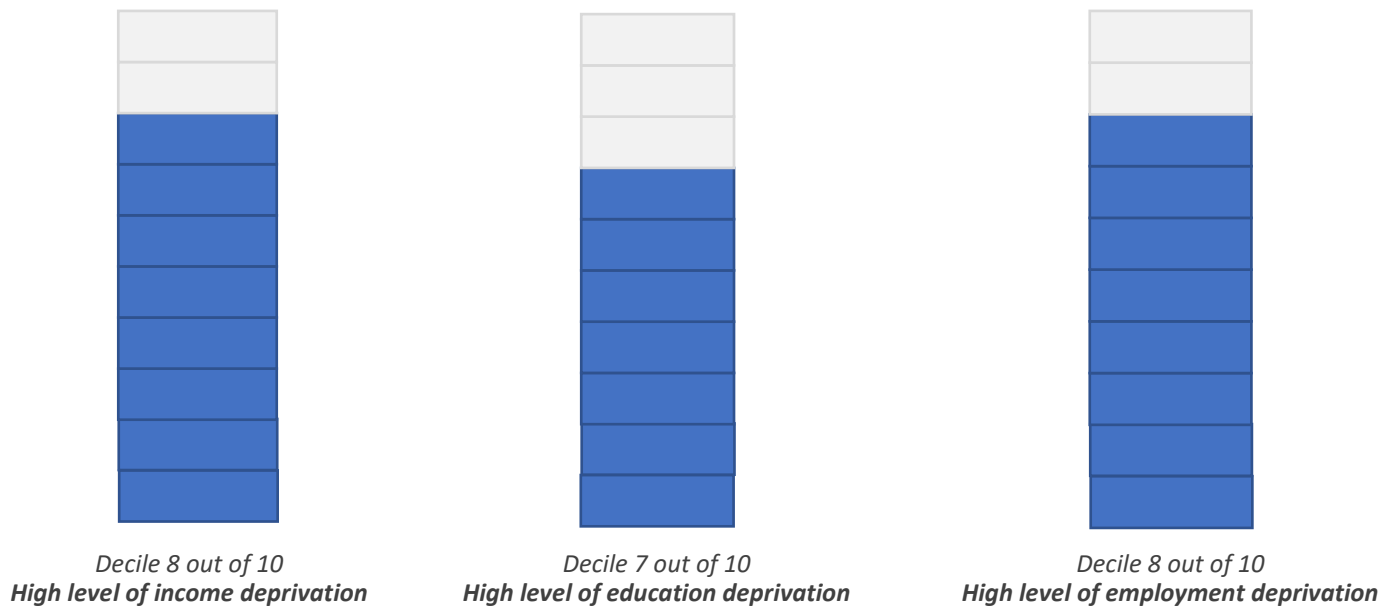


Figure: Number of people in each deprivation decile, ID 2015
 Source: Communities and Local Government (Indices of Deprivation 2015)

Through this research we also determined the following:

- 24% of people living in the area are children (aged 0-15)
- 33.51% of children are living in poverty in the area
- 27% of people have no qualifications compared with 17% across Bath and North East Somerset
- 37.9% of households with dependent children are lone parent families, higher than the BANES average of 22%

*Statistics correct as of June 2017

1.6 The Local Issue – Are They Play Deprived?

Between 26-27% of Reception aged children in this area are considered to be overweight or obese and by year 6 that has risen to 39.1% which is the highest rate of excess weight in BANES. Statistics also show that in BANES children living in deprived areas such as this are twice as likely to be obese as those living in the top local quintiles (as determined by the IMD).

We also know that Active Play makes up 53% of a child's activity between 5-11 years of age, so the high levels of unhealthy weights would point to a lack of physical activity generally and a lack of play activity specifically.

In addition to the statistical evidence pointing to inactivity prior to the start of the play intervention two WPA staff visited the play park on two separate occasions each, at the same time and day that the sessions would be running, and on each occasion found the park empty. One parent told us:

".....if my six-year-old was sat in the house now, his idea would be sitting there watching YouTube. On my tablet or on my smart TV in the bedroom. My eldest son would be sat on his laptop"

and the children themselves told us:

"..I don't really get to go out on my rollerskates"

"Well, normally I would be at home doing homework"

"We don't really have much to play"

1.7 The Global Issue – the local in context

In addition to the local issue and the specific statistics which point to inactivity and unhealthy weights WPA staff identified a global issue by reading online sources of information and academic articles. Some of the headline facts include:

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) state that inactivity is the 2nd leading risk factor that is modifiable for deaths due to non-communicable diseases. Inactivity is now considered to be the biggest threat to health and has the same risk factor as smoking. (BMJ Learning, Module on The importance of Physical Activity).
- Less than 30% of children are active enough to maintain good health and only 8% of 13-15 year old girls undertake the recommended amount of activity. (BMJ Learning, Module on The importance of Physical Activity).
- Active play makes up the majority of child's (5-15 years) activity (48% for boys and 53% for girls) and sport only around 16% for boys and 10% for girls) (Payne et al. International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity 2013, 10:136 <http://www.ijbnpa.org/content/10/136>).
- Playtime outside has decreased by 71% in one generation in both the US and UK (Consequences of Play Deprivation, Stuart L Brown (2014), Scholarpedia, 9(5):30449; http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Consequences_of_Play_Deprivation)

- Nowadays only 21% of children play outdoors compared to 71% of their parents (Sport England: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRCJ4JL_LjM)
- There is widely considered to be an 'obesity epidemic' which is seen in all developed countries.

2 Analysis of the Findings

2.1 Process of Analysing the Data

The data was analysed collaboratively by the WPA and University of Bath team during meetings where the key themes were identified and agreed upon. Following these meetings the different data sets were taken and analysed by assigned individuals.

2.2 Key Themes

The overall and sub-themes which were identified to support data analysis are listed below following an initial review of the data and planning meetings:

Overall themes across the data set:

- Opportunities and values of play (interaction between community, and intergenerational)
- Barriers to play
- The role and Impact of WPA in how families and young people in deprived communities play.

Sub-themes for analysis of young people data:

- Community/Social interaction/isolation
- Conflicts of playing interests: technology (inside) vs outdoor activities in the park (and how people interact with what is there for them to play with)
- The materiality of play (consumer culture)
- Fears about 'others' in play spaces
- WPA as facilitator and enablers of desirable forms of play?

Once the transcripts, observations and reflective diaries had been reviewed the team then came back together to discuss the prevalence and relevance of these overall and sub-themes within the different data sets, looking at both qualitative and quantitative data. It was decided that there were three themes which seemed to be most prevalent across all of the qualitative data. This seemed particularly strong evidence due to the variety of methods and researchers involved in the research process and gave us confidence in the findings.

These themes are:

- I. Overcoming isolation via social interaction:

- Play as a valued part of young people's and family's day-to-day lives (facilitating intergenerational interaction across communities)
- WPA as facilitators of play-based community interaction and cohesion

II. Materiality of play:

- Play as human and non-human relations (play as a relationship between families and equipment, toys, spaces, natural elements such as trees, grass, plants, insects and animals)
- Conflicts of playing interests: Technology (associated with indoors) versus outdoor activities in the park

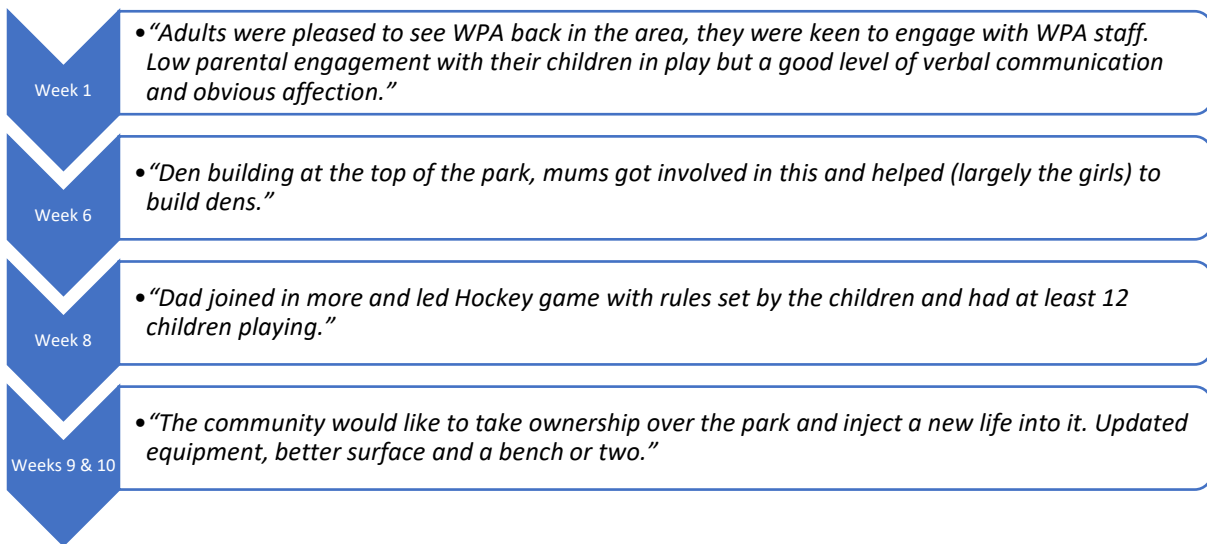
III. Barriers to play:

- Fears about 'others' in play spaces (for example wanting to stay away from older kids) who they feel may be doing drugs and how WPA help them overcome
- Lack of access to other opportunities to play, including the softplay located over the road for financial reasons.
- Unable to access the adjacent woodland area and integral shelter because of animal faeces in the spaces.
- Assumptions and fears about antisocial behaviour in play spaces (e.g., drugs, alcohol consumption, being 'watched' by strangers)

2.3 Evidence of WPA's Impact via the Key Themes

I. Overcoming isolation via social interaction

Over the 25 years that WPA has operated we have successfully supported people to become more integrated into their communities. This research provided evidence that the community outreach approach works effectively to reduce social isolation for many people. The Reflective Diaries, in particular, charted the increase in engagement and reduction in isolation, particularly amongst the boys/young men attending the sessions:



Exerts from the Play Workers Reflective Diaries

II. Materiality of Play:

We identified an interesting theme and dynamic in the way the children and parents/carers discuss play. There was a lot of focus on technology and toys as well as considerable references for ‘things’ being available in the local area for children to attend or do. More than one parent talked about the spaces available to the children/young people to play in. There were positive and negative aspects to the focus on the materiality of play.

“there’s nothing really around here for the younger ones...unless you want to go to soft-play, and then you have to pay to go to soft-play. Not everybody can afford to go to softplay all the time, whereas this, they’ve got the opportunity to come out, couple of hours for free, and play, and have fun. And sometimes they make new friends. Because not everybody goes to the same school...”

PARENT FOCUS GROUP DATA 11-03-17

Negative:

- Numerous children boasted of their tablets, smart phones and Xboxes at home.
- Other children mentioned not having many toys to play with at home.

- Parents told us of their children engaging in static screen-based activities whilst at home.

“Participant 3 (female): I am a You Tuber

Researcher: What do you put on YouTube?

Participant 3 (female): I don’t know, random stuff

Participant 2 (female): We did never have I ever

Researcher: So you guys have all got phones and tablets and things like that?

Collective Yes (including a 5 year old participant)

Participant 2 (female): I’ve only just got a phone and I am flipping 10 years old”

[GO ALONG INTERVIEWS YOUNG PEOPLE 15-02-17](#)

“Participant 3 (female): We don’t really have much to play

Researcher: So do you think that you need stuff to play with? Is that what the problem is?

Participant 3 (female): Umm yeah . . . interrupted by sister

Participant 4 (female): But we are moving to our new house where we have all our toys there

Participant 3 (female): But I don’t have many toys”

[GO ALONG INTERVIEWS YOUNG PEOPLE 15-02-17](#)

On the plus side:

Parents also mentioned that the benefit of WPA Play Workers bringing resources as beneficial and helping themselves and their children engage with each other and use their imagination.

“last week they had the old like, parachute tent thing, and um, there was the idea that will stick it there, and they was like, no, we’ll stick it over the swings. And they had a den under the swings. So different things, and using their imagination for everyday objects and turning it into something else.”

[PARENT FOCUS GROUP DATA 11-03-17](#)

III. Barriers to Play

There could be many reasons in the present day that children/young people and adults face barriers to being able to play. It could be an environmental reason, the availability of free time, financial challenges or social issues. The issues we specifically identified as part of this project are:

- Lack of access to other opportunities to play, including the soft play located over the road for financial reasons.
- Unable to access the adjacent woodland area and integral shelter because of animal faeces in the spaces.
- Frantic, intimidating physical activity by certain children/young people.
- Older young people/young adults using the space to do drugs.

*“Participant 3 (female): Those three boys that have arrived at the park
Participant 2 (female): Oh no, we don’t like those boys
Participant 3 (female): They spilt lemonade over L****, they told our dog it was ugly”*

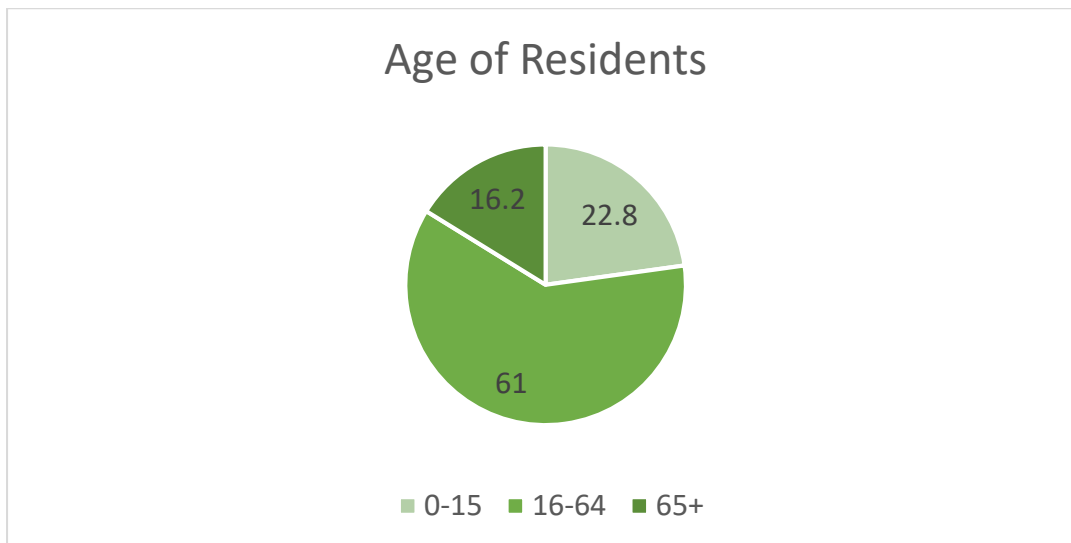
ACTIVE INTERVIEWS YOUNG PEOPLE 15-02-17

*“Researcher: So what have you been up to this week?
Chris: Garbage . . . Nothing
Researcher: Been cycling?
Chris: Nope went down but there were kids smoking weed
Researcher: Oh, where was that?
Chris: Down by the [inaudible]
Researcher: And does that put you off?
Chris: Yeah”*

ACTIVE INTERVIEWS YOUNG PEOPLE 30-02-17

2.4 Quantitative Analysis of Questionnaire Data

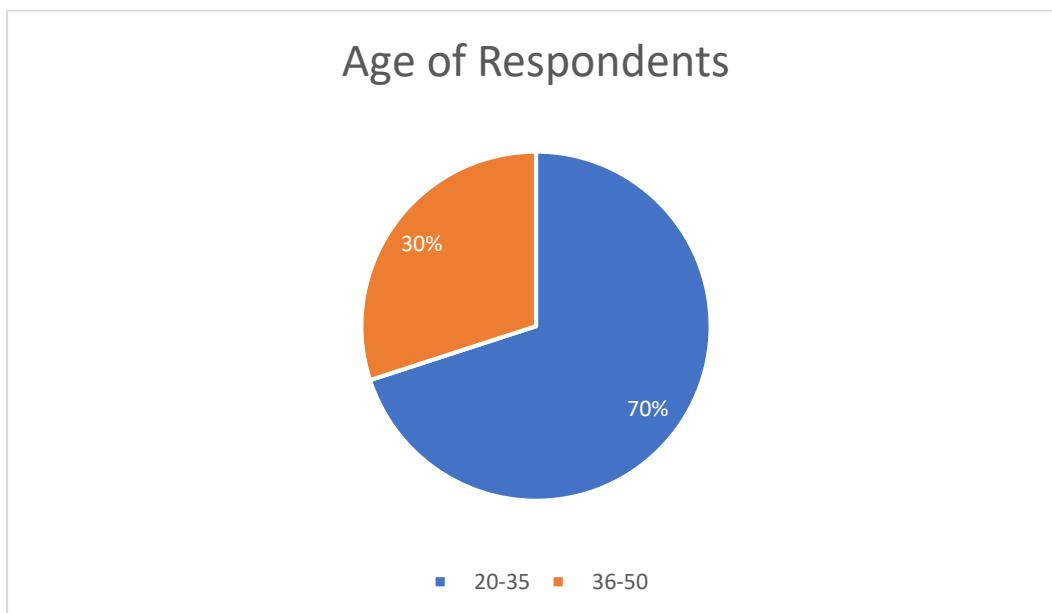
The data recorded via the questionnaires enabled us to compare the attendees at the WPA sessions to the general population of that specific area.



61% of the residents in the area are of working age (16-64)

Figure: Population estimates by 5 year age band

Source: Mid-Year Estimates (ONS) 2014



100% of WPA respondents are of working age (16-64)

Figure: Age of respondents

Source: WPA/UoB Research

All of the adults who attended the WPA sessions were of working age compared to 61% of the local population.

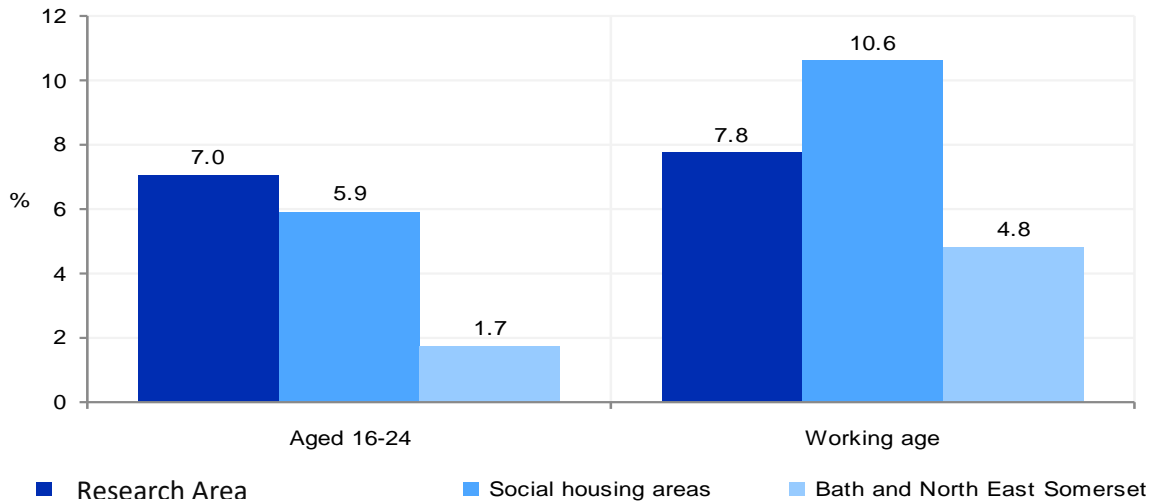


Figure: Workless benefit claimants aged 16-24 and 16-64
 Source: Jobseekers Allowance – Department for Work and Pensions (Jan-16) Incapacity benefits/Workless benefit claimants – Department for Work and Pensions (Aug-15)

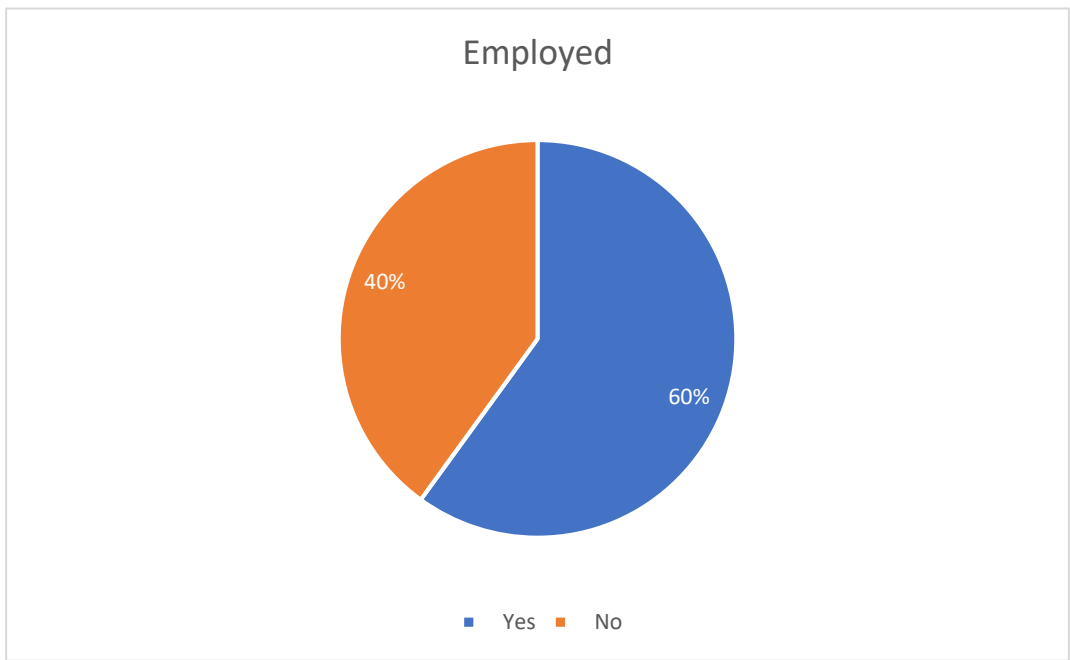


Figure: Working age questionnaire respondents at WPA sessions
 Source: WPA/UoB Research

60% of the attendees at our sessions are employed (although 83% of those employed are part-time).

The questionnaire results, compared with the government statistics (ONS and DPW etc) indicate that the WPA Outreach Community Play services in this area attract a high level % of the working age, unemployed population.

These adults and children attend our services and engage with WPA voluntarily.

2.5 Positive Comments about Play and WPA's Community Outreach Services

Throughout the sessions and at the focus groups parents made numerous comments about how positive play can be for children and about WPA's sessions specifically. Here are a few below:

"I think as well cause it works, with having their imagination it works, with using their imagination it comes into their academic work with writing, with using their imagination with items they've got to build with or make with, to use their imaginations when they play, they can say, with that, they go, the ideas in their head and they can put it to paper, it's the imagination of like stories and things like that"

PARENT FOCUS GROUP DATA 11-03-17

"it gives them a choice of as I say, if someone likes playing football, and then, you're sort of like, 'oh well we know you like football, so we'll adapt it, we'll adapt the game so it's something different. Well, we know you like football but you don't like basketball so we'll adapt it, so you like incorporate it, so you know, we'll kick the ball as well as...so you adapt it. So it's a different type of...it's also finding their interests of, what they like."

PARENT FOCUS GROUP DATA 11-03-17

"it gives them a choice of as I say, if someone likes playing football, and then, you're sort of like, 'oh well we know you like football, so we'll adapt it, we'll adapt the game so it's something different. Well, we know you like football but you don't like basketball so we'll adapt it, so you like incorporate it, so you know, we'll kick the ball as well as...so you adapt it. So it's a different type of...it's also finding their interests of, what they like."

PARENT FOCUS GROUP DATA 11-03-17

"Researcher: OK, but when it comes to playing here, when it comes to Wednesday and Thursday and you are playing here, I notice that you are playing loads of football, rugby, tennis. Why do you think you choose to play those sorts of games?"

David: Yeah, because I like them and I am actually decent at them

Researcher: So do you struggle playing things when you don't think you're any good at them?"

David: Yeah

Researcher: What is that like?"

David: It's really frustrating for me. . . It is really frustrating for me because like, when I try to play the game umm and end up messing up and it is really annoying

Researcher: Yeah, you find it frustrating? Is that like at school?"

David: Everywhere

Researcher: Everywhere you get frustrated?"

David: Yeah

Researcher: But here you don't feel like that?"

David: No

Researcher: You just feel like you can just play?"

David: Yeah

Researcher: That must be so nice to just do that. Why do you think that is?"

David: Probably because it is a friendly atmosphere, everyone, you can literally speak to everyone, everyone will give you a reply"

3 The Conclusions of the Research

After analysing the data we came to the conclusion that WPA's outdoor, outreach play does help alleviate play deprivation in this particular Somer Valley community by:

1. Providing access and opportunity for outdoor, active play as well as craft activities which the children wouldn't otherwise access.
2. Enabling the adults and children in the community to come together, to develop relationships and make decisions about their local community.
3. Strengthening relationships between parents and children through play.
4. Supporting children to resolve conflicts and play together.
5. Providing opportunities to explore different activities (specifically sport/physical activities) in a non-judgemental manner....they cannot fail when they play with WPA.

4 The Next Steps

WPA has continued to work at Writhlington. We have provided an 18 week programme of Healthy Family Cooking and Play with the support of Bath College and are now continuing our work through the provision of outdoor play and cooking sessions focused on supporting boys and young men to develop and maintain good mental health.

WPA staff have also supported the community by contacting the Housing Association who have now agreed to improve the shelter in the park area.