WE WANT TO PLAY TOO!
(Harrow 2017)

A study and proposal on parks, play and short breaks in the London Borough of Harrow

Harrow Parents 4 Disabled Children (HP4DC) is a parent-led SEND participation forum that is funded by the DfE, managed by 1 Voice Community, which is a registered charity and support group for parents in Brent, Harrow and other surrounding boroughs.
Executive Summary

Background

This preliminary study and summary proposal aims to demonstrate that parent and carers through the process of co-production with various departments and agencies, can be part of the solution to the ever-shrinking public funds and cuts to valuable services for families of special needs and disabled children and young people.

The development of parks and open spaces in Harrow has always been a major consideration for the council and residents. Over the years there has been ongoing developments and improvements to several key sites. Harrow council had recently undertaken a series of consultations and regeneration of local parks. The latest (11 April-1 June 2017) called ‘Your Place Your Space’ was not widely known about in the special needs community. Parents of special needs children and young people have decided they would like to do their own in-depth survey of disability friendly facilities available in the parks and to ensure they have adequate input into the future development and regeneration plans, and offer solutions they would like to see to enable them to enjoy the parks too.

In 2012, Harrow Council’s SEN department in partnership with HP4DC, carried out an extensive consultation on short breaks provision. They asked parents and carers what services they would like to see in the borough.

These are the key points arising from the consultation. The replies included the following:

- “Specialists carers to provide overnight support”
- “A specialist centre where children can have fun and parents can hang out”
- “Transport to enable their child to access the activities in the community”
- “Complementary therapy”
- “Support for parents”
- “A local toy library where they could hire or use the specialist equipment”
- “Good quality childcare from trusted providers”
- “More regular short breaks, including overnight stays”
- “A range of activities that enabled their child to experience new activities and develop new skills, such as swimming lessons, horse-riding lessons, etc”

In 2013, Harrow Council responded by inviting specialist providers to bid to deliver services and activities for disabled children and young people and their families. They produced a useful service directory with details of the range of services and local information. Disabled children and their families were able to choose from a list of 11 approved providers offering over 30 services including the following headings:

✓ Specialist group-based play and leisure activities
✓ Day and overnight childcare
✓ Community outreach

Since then many families have been able to get direct access to respite or direct payments for find their own respite providers. Many families benefited from the flexible use of their direct payment and the additional respite/short breaks providers. This improvement in short breaks provision was somewhat unique to Harrow compared to the neighbouring boroughs who were either unable to provide any or very little short breaks to their families. However, over time some parents have since told us that they have been finding it increasing difficult to access the full range of services advertised in the directory, and therefore difficulty in using their direct payments. There doesn’t seem to be as many providers available as first advertised in the directory and of those available, they currently have a waiting list. Other issues raised by parents in the original consultation were not addressed and were probably outside of the scope of the project at the time. These comments included the following:

- “A specialist centre where children can have fun and parents can hang out”
- “More stimulating outdoor activities”
- “Fun activities for siblings”
In 2017, parents have told us these additional comments:

- “There is simply nowhere for us to go in the whole of Harrow”
- “A specialist playground and café would be LIFE CHANGING!”
- “I recently went to a Harrow SENDIAS family day event. I have to admit it's nice not to be stared at because we are surrounded by other families with disabled children”

“We want to play too!” is a study and proposal is based on an inspirational approach taken by the Hammersmith and Fulham parent forum called ParentsActive.* The survey of their parents’ needs led to partnership working with various agencies that resulted in two major subsequent developments which have since been recognised as good practice in SEN provision:

- Improved facilities in parks in the borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
- A purpose built disabled short breaks centre

There are 60 parks and open spaces in Harrow. Special needs children in wheelchairs, especially are able to use very limited pieces of equipment if any at all in the parks. Currently, families are having to travel outside the borough for specialist play facilities and disabled friendly places. These places include Thames Valley Adventure Playground (also known as TVAP in Taplow, Berkshire), Partyman World of Play (Wembley), Aldenham Country Playground (Elstree, Hertfordshire), Willow Farm Activity (St Albans, Hertfordshire).

By including disabled access to play and the use of Harrow parks (with improved SEN play equipment) in the conversation about short breaks provision, we believe we can:

1. Give families additional opportunities to spend quality time as a family within Harrow
2. Take pressure off the current short breaks/respite provision and providers
3. Ensure continued investment into Harrow parks to be inclusive and accessible to all pupils and families, and not just to neurotypical or able-bodied children/young people outside of school.

Summary of the proposal for Harrow:

- Improved disability friendly play equipment and facilities (toilets and disabled parking), in all (or key) Harrow parks and open spaces.
- The development of a specialist SEN playground and community café, in The Cedars park, Harrow Weald. The community café would be behind the carpark of the current KCA building formerly known as Cedars Hall, which already acts a base for SEN community groups; SENDIAS, HP4DC, Westminster Society and the shorts breaks provider itself KCA, thus making it the first of many disability friendly centres in Harrow. A specialist SEN playground would be a welcomed addition to the current (normal) playground which will make the whole park inclusive and sensitive to the needs of special needs children and young people. Therefore, allowing siblings to play in the same playground.

The purpose of this study and forthcoming parents survey (Sept 2017) is to judge the progress made since the council’s 2012 consultation, to find out if the short breaks provision project fulfils its objectives and met the expectations parents had. We hope to make further recommendations to investigate wider issues and opportunities to achieve similar or better outcomes in Harrow than that achieved in Hammersmith and Fulham.

When completed, the survey will highlight parental expectations of what play and parks mean to their disabled child. We will also report parents’ opinion of the proposed community cafe and whether the improvements we hope to achieve will help families fully enjoy the facilities in Harrow parks. The successful completion of the project will mean this would be the manifestation and tangible evidence of parent’s views being taken account and partnership working taking place. We believe this will lead to an increased motivation in engagement and co-production, leading to improved services for more families in Harrow. We also hope more decision makers will become more disability aware and inclusive in future planning and development of parks.
Approach/Methodology

The steering group /advisory board of HP4DC designed a parental questionnaire to be distributed widely, mostly online via a link to the proposal on www.surveymonkey.com (however some parents will receive paper questionnaires). The survey will be launched in the beginning of September for the whole month. HP4DC will encourage survey completion via regular emails to the parents in the database. We aim to reach as many parent carers through community groups, Harrow schools, and pupils in out-of-borough schools. The report will be based not only on the survey but also on feedback received from parents at meetings, coffee mornings and individual support offered to parents around their respite needs around Harrow via various agencies. A summary and follow-up report will be produced in due course.

Actions

We are seeking responses (and guidance) to this study and proposal from:

- The Harrow Parks Service
- Harrow Council SEN departments
- Relevant officers involved in access to play and parks
- Gareth Thomas MP, Harrow West
- Councillor Christine Robson, Children, Young People and Schools Portfolio Holder
- Councillor Sue Anderson, Community, Culture & Resident Engagement Portfolio Holder

For any further information or queries please contact: Olivia King-Boateng (oliviakboateng@gmail.com), HP4DC Parent Forum Co-ordinator.

*Link to the ParentsActive report can be found at http://www.parentsactive.org.uk/we_want_to_play_2013