

# KIDS SQUARE



## KidsSquare – exploring child friendly space in Belfast city centre



February 2012





## Our Vision

Our vision is of a healthy, equitable and vibrant city where all sectors provide individual and shared leadership, enabling citizens to achieve their full potential.

## Our Mission

Our mission is, through our leadership and innovation, to inspire and utilise the collective and individual strengths of partners to deliver the World Health Organisation European Healthy City Phase V (2009-2013) goals and requirements and maximise their impact on health and inequalities.



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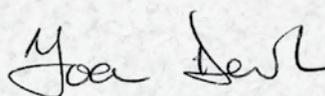
## Foreword

Child friendly space is about more than specific places set aside for children, such as play parks and children's corners. Children need access to the entire city, town and neighbourhood. They also need to be given permission to take ownership of spaces, and use space in their own way. This is important both to help children develop fully and healthily, and to allow them to learn the experience of being a full, valued member of the community and society.

KidsSquare set out to test these principles, and to explore what child friendly space in Belfast city centre could look like. It aimed in particular to seek the views of children and families who took part, as a way of gathering important information. The response to the event significantly exceeded our expectations, with over 1,000 children and families taking time to make St Anne's Square their own space during the event weekend in September 2011.

Belfast Healthy Cities aims to continue working on child friendly city centre space, and explore opportunities for both short and long term child friendly spaces in the city. KidsSquare provides a model for developing child friendly urban centre space, which can be replicated in a range of settings to provide further experience. It also provides a helpful model for gathering information about the wishes and needs of children and families, which can support policy and decision making. KidsSquare as a model is innovative also in the international context, and we will share and develop it with our colleagues within the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, which originated the concept of healthy urban environments.

The project was inspired by Belfast Healthy Cities' Healthy Urban Environment working group, and supported financially by the Department for Social Development, through the Laganside Events Grant. Activities at the event were facilitated in collaboration with Play Resource, Sportopps, and artist Caroline Jeffrey, who facilitated the evaluation element. Our sincere thanks go to all facilitators, who ensured the smooth and successful running of the event. Special thanks must also go to Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, which supported the event with staff time. Special thanks also go to Belfast Healthy Cities' staff team, who helped facilitation during the event and to Jonna Monaghan in the team, who led arrangements for the event.



Joan Devlin  
Director



## Introduction

Most children today grow up in towns and cities. They use the same spaces as adults, and the same services. The town or city centre is an important location also for them, both because it offers particular services and shops, and because it helps them create a sense of identity.



Spaces that welcome children help children express themselves and explore their physical limits, which supports healthy development and builds respect for children. In doing so, child friendly environments also support children to take ownership of space and shape places in ways that suit them. This helps children engage with their neighbourhood, community and city, which in turn underpins mental and social development and encourages young people to participate in society. Indeed, such child friendly environments are a key indication that children are valued members of society.

Children's needs also fundamentally shape family life. In other words, families tend to

use services in places where children can be accommodated. Child friendly space can make town and city centres inviting for families as places to visit, which in turn can significantly support social and economic regeneration and revitalisation. Over time, a child friendly approach to development and regeneration can also attract families to live in town and city centres, which has been identified as key to socially as well as economically vibrant and successful cities.

This project was intended to explore what child friendly space in a city centre could look like, and how it might work. It was designed as a public event, in order to create a realistic context, and engage families and children from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible. This was the first time an event incorporating a number of elements in a single space was organised in Northern Ireland. Therefore, a key aim was to gather people's views, and generate learning and experience that can inform future policy and decision making.



## Why it matters: The importance of child friendly environments

The physical environment plays a role for children's development, by shaping opportunities for physical activity and play, socialising, and accessing facilities and services. For example, children with easy access to open space near home are more likely to play outdoors regularly.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, there is emerging evidence, including very recent evidence from the Republic of Ireland, that children who live in areas perceived to be less safe are more likely to lead sedentary lifestyles.<sup>2</sup> Such lifestyles, in turn, are associated with a higher risk for obesity<sup>3</sup>, and in some cases also for social isolation.

Opportunities to meet friends, and indeed people of different ages and backgrounds, are also vital for children's wellbeing and healthy development. Public spaces, such as town centres, neighbourhood centres and in particular green spaces play an important role for this<sup>4</sup>, as they offer a level of freedom, both in terms of access and freedom from parental supervision. Numerous studies indicate that children value spaces of all sizes and types, provided they are clean and feel safe.<sup>5</sup> Town centres also offer the added benefit of providing a natural meeting place for children – and indeed parents – of different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds, which can contribute to

social cohesion and good relations both immediately and over time.



There is also anecdotal evidence indicating that families prefer to shop and use services in areas where it is easier to accommodate children's needs, and that some avoid town centres due to the lack of suitable space for breaks and distraction. Such views were also expressed in the evaluation activity of this project. While evidence on the impact of child friendly environments specifically is limited, it has been shown that people oriented space – for example pedestrian friendly town centres – does increase

<sup>1</sup> Barton, H (2009) 'Land use planning and health and wellbeing'. *Land Use Policy* 26S (2009) S115–S123

<sup>2</sup> McCoy, S et al (2012). *Growing up in Ireland report 3: Influences on 9-year-olds' learning*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Available at <http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/BKMNEXT204.pdf>.  
*Home, school and community*

<sup>3</sup> The Foresight programme (2007) *Tackling obesity: future choices*. London: Government Office for Science. Available at <http://www.foresight.gov.uk/OurWork/ActiveProjects/Obesity/KeyInfo/Index.asp>.

<sup>4</sup> See eg. Castonguay, G & Jutras, S (2009). 'Children's appreciation of outdoor places in a poor neighbourhood'. In *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol 29, issue 1, p. 101-109; Bell, S, V Hamilton, A Montarzino et al (2008). *Greenspace and quality of life: a critical literature review*. Stirling: Greenspace Scotland, available at [http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/pdf/greenspace\\_and\\_quality\\_of\\_life\\_literature\\_review\\_aug2008.pdf](http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/pdf/greenspace_and_quality_of_life_literature_review_aug2008.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See eg. Mitchell, H et al (2007). 'Nuances of neighbourhood: Children's perceptions of the space between home and school in Auckland, New Zealand'. In *Geoforum*, vol 38, issue 4, p. 614-627;

footfall, and in residential areas, adds value to properties<sup>6</sup>. In addition, there is evidence that for example green spaces, seating areas and public art generates interest in town centres, and can make them more inviting places to visit and spend time in.<sup>7</sup>

In short, child friendly environments support children to fulfil their potential, which also gives them a good start for adult life. In addition, however, child friendly approaches can support all people in a city, and contribute to city development. Importantly, existing evidence as well as findings from this project highlight that child friendliness is not about specific provision for children or a separate area, but about ensuring children can enjoy an environment and participate in a community or city on an equitable footing with others.

Internationally, UNICEF has developed similar guidelines through its Child Friendly Cities initiative. In 2011, UNICEF published a set of assessment tools on child friendly cities and communities, developed through research undertaken within this initiative.<sup>8</sup> In Europe, the European Network Child Friendly Cities has developed guidelines for child friendly cities and collated examples of good practice. The Network aims to make child friendly policies an integral part of decision making, and is active in 15 countries including the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The five guidelines

that steer the Network focus on a holistic, integral, intergenerational approach, arguing that 'Child friendliness does not imply that children require their own city but it does imply that children are recognised as citizens that are a part of the entire city'. The guidelines also emphasise the importance of engaging children and young people in decision making, and stress that child friendliness is a dynamic aim, which should be seen as a constant ambition rather than a label or brand.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Litman, T (2010). *Where we want to be: home location preferences and their implications for smart growth*. Victoria Transport Institute, Victoria (CAN) 2007. <http://www.vtpi.org/sgcp.pdf>; Mayor, K, S Lyons et al (2009). *A hedonic analysis of the value of parks and green spaces in the Dublin area*. ESRI Working Paper 331. Dublin: ESRI. <http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/20091130105730/WP331.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> *Grey to green: how we shift funding and skills to green our cities* (2009). London: CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment). <http://www.cabe.org.uk/files/grey-to-green.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See eg, <http://www.childfriendlycities.org/en/research>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.childfriendlycities.eu/EN-CFC/Guidelines-Child-Friendly-Cities/page/2940/>

## Examples from elsewhere

The concept of an annual day dedicated to play, and children's right to play, has existed since the 1990s in the UK, and is coordinated by national play organisations across the UK. The focus of the PlayDay campaign is play in itself, although for example campaign literature in 2010 highlighted the importance of a good environment and the potential benefits of child friendly space for social cohesion.<sup>10</sup>

Sandnes, a city of just under 70,000 people in southern Norway, has developed the Children's City concept, which aims to engage children in governance and decision making. As part of this, children and young people were invited to create their own models and share their views on how the physical environment should change. The municipality also temporarily transformed

a car park in the city centre to an urban beach, to highlight possibilities for change. The concept has contributed to making children a greater priority in decision making and given them a stakeholder role in governance.<sup>11</sup>

In Dalston, a neighbourhood within Hackney in east London, a local square is used as a children's space most evenings and weekends. Key equipment is provided to encourage activity and supervisors are present, but the aim is to allow children to take ownership of the space. This facility, which was initiated through a pilot day in 2010, became a regular occurrence on several weekdays in 2011 and will continue in this way in 2012. Local stakeholders indicate it has encouraged people to use surrounding businesses and facilities, and overall contributed to reviving the area.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>10</sup> <http://www.playday.org.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> Presentation on Sandnes- young people's participation in city development, WHO European Healthy Cities Annual Conference 2011, Liege, Belgium (unpublished).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/free\\_giant\\_playground\\_in\\_dalston\\_1\\_917246](http://www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/free_giant_playground_in_dalston_1_917246)

## KidsSquare: Project Context

KidsSquare was open to families and children of all ages, although a key requirement was that children must be accompanied by an adult. The event programme was designed to be flexible enough to accommodate children from around 3 up to 14 years, although it was expected that the core participant group would be children aged around 5-11 years. Due to the open nature of the event, no exact figure of actual participant ages was collected, but observation indicated that active participants ranged from toddlers to teenagers and also adults attending with children.

KidsSquare took place at St Anne's Square, with permission of the property owner. St Anne's Square is a new development located between St Anne's Cathedral and Dunbar Link in the Cathedral Quarter area of Belfast city centre, and incorporates a public open air square enclosed by commercial and residential units, including a hotel and a restaurant.

The event opened on Friday 23 September, as part of Belfast Culture Night 2011. It consisted of three five hour sessions throughout the weekend (Friday 23- Sunday 25 September). The event was part funded by the Department for Social Development, through the Laganside events fund.

The event was planned in collaboration with a working group including Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and Public Health Agency. Belfast Health and Social Care Trust also kindly donated staff time to assist with facilitation during the event, while Belfast



City Council assisted with equipment. Belfast Healthy Cities contributed funding and also provided the majority of staff time. Staff skills in child protection were updated to ensure effective and safe facilitation.

The event was advertised online through an electronic flyer, and also through notices on websites such as the Culture Night 2011 website, NI4kids and the Belfast Visitor Convention Bureau. Postcard sized flyers were also used to advertise the event in city centre businesses, including cafès and children's clothes stores. Over the event weekend, KidsSquare was also mentioned on radio programmes on BBC Radio Ulster and U105.

## Programme and activities

In total, over 1,000 children and families visited KidsSquare over the three days. The busiest day was Friday, when over 500 children and their accompanying adults visited the square. Sunday was the quietest day, but despite poor weather over 100 children and families took part.

## Rationale of programme

KidsSquare was designed as a space focused on giving children freedom to shape their own uses of the space, in line with the underlying rationale. Activities offered were therefore intended to spark ideas and encourage children's own creativity.

The activities offered were grouped under the broad themes of Creative Space, Active Space, and Free Space. These themes were chosen to reflect:

1. children's interests
2. priorities of collaborating organisations
3. evidence of activities that support children's development

For example, physical games and active play support healthy physical development, which is a key theme in health promotion. Children also enjoy running about, but this is typically not allowed in public places. Enabling this can therefore be a way to explore alternative uses of public space.

Each space was given its own zone in the square.



## Active Space

Activities in Active Space included physical games, such as tag, and skill games such as balancing beanbags or aiming them at targets. This activity was facilitated by Sportopps, a social economy business seeking to provide physical activity opportunities for everyone.

Active Space also featured a smoothie bike – a child size spinning bike, converted to drive a blender by pedalling. Fruit, milk and yoghurt were provided to allow children to make smoothies to their own taste, and two different size bikes were available to accommodate children of a wide age range. The bikes were kindly lent by Suffolk Lenadon Interface Group, a community organisation based in west Belfast.

### Experiences at the event: enjoying the freedom to move

The smoothie bikes attracted a lot of interest from participants of all ages. Particularly some younger children chose to simply pedal the bike, even if they did not like smoothies. Others returned several times, asking if they were allowed to make another smoothie for dad/mum/ another relative. During calmer periods, facilitators also used the activity as an opportunity to discuss healthy eating.

The physical activity games engaged in particular groups of children, or teams established within families. Skills games, such as throwing beanbags and hoops towards set target lines, were also effective in engaging people across the age range. Due to the fluid nature of the

event, activities that were similarly flexible were generally most effective. Short duration games such as tag worked well with groups of older children, and also created focus points that helped children move between activities.



## Creative Space

The Creative Space theme engaged artists to facilitate small arts activities, which changed daily, and a cardboard city, which developed throughout the weekend. This theme was organised with Play Resource, a charity providing a range of resources and materials, advice, ideas and training for people working with children, young people and community groups.

### Experiences at the event: sparking ideas

The Creative Space was an area that attracted ongoing strong interest. Feedback from a number of the artists engaged indicated, nevertheless, that they were happy with the level of participants, and did not feel overwhelmed by the demand. Children, in turn, enjoyed the opportunity to take away a creation of their own, and many children proudly demonstrated their artwork to event staff as well as parents.

In addition to offering an activity in themselves, the guided activities helped children and families find ideas and inspiration for their own activities in the Free Space. Often, the art area provided a natural first destination or draw point for children when they came to the square, but they then found opportunities of their own in the Free Space and Active Space.

The cardboard city activity changed shape significantly over the three days, and included opportunities for free construction as well as building on existing constructions. The activity proved particularly popular with younger children, who enjoyed the opportunity to play in maze like constructions. It also provided a specific focus for collaborative work between children and parents. Teamwork between children and parents was a key feature on the Sunday, when rain forced the cardboard city activity to move indoors into an unused shop unit. In some cases, families spent over an hour on creating their own cardboard houses and linked constructions.



## Free Space

Plenty of open space was reserved in the square to encourage spontaneous activity and enable children to put their own ideas into practice. Pavement chalk was provided as encouragement, and also to indicate permission to use the space in a different way. Giant versions of board games such as Connect 4 and Jenga! were provided for children and families to play together.

It was considered important to incorporate specific space for younger children under 4, and provide opportunities for them to be active as well as use their own initiative. Elements of the commercially available Snug Kit play equipment fulfilled these requirements. This outdoor play equipment is intended to support free and creative play, as each element can be used in a number of ways or combined with others for more complex constructions. It has also been approved by Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents for use on hard surfaces without safety surfacing.

### Experiences at the event: encouraging creativity and families working together

The Free Space was the most popular area, in particular on Friday and Saturday. The uses found for this space directly highlighted how a supportive environment encourages creativity of all kinds. The pavement chalk proved particularly popular, and artwork created quickly gave the square a child friendly feel.

The Snug Kit and giant building blocks also proved very popular. Children using



them ranged from babies to pre teens, and all found their own uses for the materials provided. For example, younger children might play hide and seek with a single block, while older children built elaborate constructions. Also the Jenga! blocks were often used as construction material, highlighting the creative opportunities identified by children and parents.

Sometimes children collaborated on projects, but it was particularly notable that parents very often became engaged in play with their children. This varied from suggesting or supporting construction games, to parents working together with children to develop ideas or play games. Adults were also often seen to use the pavement chalk themselves, as well as encourage children of a wide range of ages to try it. For example, adults helped create impromptu games areas from hopscotch to tic-tac-toe.

## People's views: what is child friendly space and where?

Gathering people's views, both on the event itself and more generally on child friendly space in the city centre, was a very important element of KidsSquare. To encourage in particular children to express themselves freely, art was chosen as the medium for the evaluation activity.

An artist was engaged to undertake this activity, which was aimed at both children and parents. The format included large canvases of key locations in the city centre, on which participants could attach drawings of desired activities. Other locations were available for small cardboard 'stages', and all contributions were photographed. These activities were primarily aimed at children, and also chosen almost exclusively by children.



Participants were also able to leave written feedback, or chat about their views, which were preferred by most adults. In total, over 60 people engaged in the activity over the three days.

A detailed report of the evaluation activity, by the artist Caroline Jeffrey, is available separately on Belfast Healthy Cities' website at [www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications](http://www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications). Through their artwork, children highlighted a range of wishes for child friendly activities in key locations such as at City Hall, Custom House Square and St Anne's Square. In particular opportunities for different sports, ranging from dance to football, were requested by many. Fun fairs were also a popular idea, while many children who shared their views said that regular events or clubs would be a good idea. Older children and teenagers highlighted the need for a 'drop in' type space where it would be acceptable to just sit around.

Parents typically felt that existing opportunities could be used more fully. For example, the fountains in Custom House Square were mentioned as a good



play opportunities. Several parents felt that different play opportunities could be set up throughout the city, both in shopping malls and outdoors.

KidsSquare itself got positive feedback from children as well as parents. Many felt that similar events should be available more regularly, and that simply access to space where children are welcome makes a difference. The venue itself got very positive feedback: as it was enclosed, parents felt it was safe even for young children, while giving an appropriately intimate feel.

An additional evaluation activity undertaken throughout the weekend was giving participants stickers to be put on a 'darts target board'. The feedback gathered this way was overwhelmingly positive, and informal conversations with children and families indicated that participants were expressing genuine feelings. Less positive 'marks' were left primarily by older children and younger teenagers, who felt that activities did not fully cater for their areas of interest. However, other older children were pleased to have an opportunity to engage in activities they normally might not participate in anymore.



## Summary of learning and next steps

KidsSquare was intended to explore what child friendly space in the city centre might look like, by offering a short term space dedicated to children. The level of attendance significantly exceeded expectations and was in itself a positive sign that local families feel the need for a child friendly approach in city centre space. Feedback from children as well as parents further strengthened this, and highlighted two key points. Firstly, participants felt that child friendly space is a key priority. Secondly, the evaluation indicated that participants did not ask for a major redesign or dedicated space for children, but that they saw opportunities to strengthen the existing environment.

The event in itself also highlighted that much can be done through the existing environment. It was notable that given the opportunity children – and indeed parents – took the space as their own, and used it



in imaginative ways that required primarily encouragement and support. In short, a key ingredient was permission to take ownership and limited pre-existing rules.

There is now strong evidence that high quality environments support children's health and wellbeing, and also contribute to social wellbeing. While examples of attempts to transform existing places into flexible, child friendly space are more limited, it appears that they can immediately contribute to social cohesion and revival, generating benefits to social wellbeing for people of all ages.



KidsSquare offers an intersectoral model for developing child friendly environments further, which also can generate evidence on what attracts children and families, and what makes a space functional for these groups.

It is intended that the model will be tested and developed further, in collaboration with a range of stakeholders including service providers as well as children and local communities. This process can in itself generate important experiences and ideas for children of how space can be used, while the evidence gathered can provide valuable, locally based information for supporting future policy and decision making.



Working together for a healthier Belfast

[www.belfasthealthycities.com](http://www.belfasthealthycities.com)



[www.belfastculturenight.com](http://www.belfastculturenight.com)

St Anne's Square, Belfast

Fri 23 Sept: 4-9pm | Sat 24 Sept: 1-6pm | Sun 25 Sept: 1-6pm

## Acknowledgements

### Healthy Urban Environment Working Group

Joan Devlin	Belfast Healthy Cities
Anne Doherty	Belfast City Council (Development)
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### KidsSquare working group

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Alan McHaffie	Belfast City Council
Diane McIntyre	Public Health Agency
Jonna Monaghan	Belfast Healthy Cities
Adam Turkington	Belfast Culture Night



# What Do You Think Of Kid's Square?

• Not For Me

Not Sure

Love It

HEALTHY CITIES  
**Belfast**

Working together for a healthier Belfast

**Make Your Mark**  
**Stick Your Sticker**



# PLAY CREATE

JOIN IN!

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