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Kids' centre under M-way

THE SAFEST place to hide is under the light; the quietest — and the least lead-polluted — spot near a motorway is bang under it. There's no reason why, in space-starved inner London, all the empty space under the multi-lane Westway should not be put to some good use.

Down under the western end of the motorway, where the gypsies are living at the moment, it's planned to build a sports centre. Further along, near a patch of unexpected trees and grass, a group of local parents, nursery teachers, playgroup people and child minders are hoping to set up a nursery centre of a very special sort.

If things work out as planned (more particularly, if £200,000 can be found) mothers in this hard-pressed corner of West London will have on their doorsteps a nursery school, a day nursery, a clinic, a welfare centre, a gossip-space and an emergency day-time dumping-ground for children during family crises — all under one roof. Over the roof, of course, will be the Westway itself.

At the moment, the under-fives of North Kensington, as in so many deprived neighbourhoods, get something of a raw deal. The group behind the project, the Westway Nursery Association, have pointed out that probably 3,000-plus pre-school children in this area of crumbling houses and high-rise flats get no nursery provision, however much their parents may long for it.

"The social services," says the association's chairman, adult education lecturer David Head, "are thinking all the time of the worst cases — of the people in the greatest need." That's as it should be; but it means that a whole group of what Mr Head calls the "normally deprived" don't get much of a look-in.

Hence the need for the centre — and hence the way in which it's going to be run. Mr Head explains that it will service not just one type of deprived local child but all local children, and for all purposes.

"Our concept is a catchment area in which all under-fives and their parents have a right to make full use of the centre and help to run it," he goes on. "This sort of urban environment is hostile to children; what one is trying to do is to find ways of giving them something that will help them grow into real people."

It is, if you like, positive anti-discrimination.

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