



Restoring children's freedom to play out – a policy manifesto

The problem

Over just one or two generations, the majority of children in the UK have lost the freedom to “go out and play”, even on their own street, estate or immediate neighbourhood. Children’s time spent outdoors,¹ outdoor play², ‘roaming range’ and independent mobility³ have all massively reduced over a few decades, with serious impact on their health and wellbeing.⁴

The pandemic - and in particular, the impact of lockdown rules on children’s ability to get outside, play, see friends and be active⁵ - hugely exacerbated this existing situation, causing further serious damage to children’s mental and physical health. The impact of this was starkly worse for children from lower income households and ethnic minority groups, thus increasing inequalities even further.

Even pre-pandemic, 80% of children were not getting the basic hour per day of physical activity they need to be healthy and well.⁶ One in four children now leave primary school clinically obese⁷ and children’s mental health is at crisis point.⁸

All this suggests that current Government strategies and policy have not worked to address the underlying causes of children’s inactivity and poor health. Physical activity interventions and spending have not compensated for children’s loss of freedom to simply be outside every day: walking, cycling and playing.

Play is a right under the UNCRC because it is not a ‘nice to have’ but is essential for children to live healthy, active lives; and to grow and develop as rounded happy people. Playing outside is also the most natural, accessible and democratic way for children to be physically active without needing money, transport or organised activities⁹.

As well as the health benefits, children are missing out on all the other essential outcomes - and simple enjoyment - of playing out near home: making friends of different ages and backgrounds; building independence, resilience and social skills; having a sense of belonging in their local community; all the well-known emotional and developmental benefits of free play¹⁰.

Undoubtedly, the biggest barrier to children’s freedom is increased traffic dominance – children have been pushed out of residential streets that were once a shared space for play and community. Parents consistently say that the very real danger posed by cars is the main thing preventing them from letting their children play out near home or roaming further afield.¹¹

¹ Cleland V, Timperio A, Salmon J, et al. (2010) *Predictors of time spent outdoors among children: 5-year longitudinal findings*. Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health 64:400-406.

² Play England. (2010). *ICM survey for Playday*. <http://www.playday.org.uk/campaigns-3/previouscampaigns/2010-our-place/>

³ Shaw, B., Fagan-Watson, B., Fraudendienst, B. et al. (2013) *Children’s independent mobility: a comparative study in England and Germany (1971–2010)*. London: Policy Studies Institute

⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Play-final-report.pdf>

⁵ <https://playingout.net/blog/campaigning-for-play-in-a-pandemic/>

⁶ NHS Digital. (2019) *NHS Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet, England, 2019*. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet-england-2019>

⁷ Gregory, A. (2021) *Childhood obesity in England soars during pandemic*. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/nov/16/childhood-obesity-in-england-soared-during-pandemic>

⁸ Local Government Association. (2022) *Children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health - facts and figures*.

<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-camhs/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-and>

⁹ <https://playingout.net/blog/why-play-is-key-to-exercise/>

¹⁰ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201206/free-play-is-essential-normal-emotional-development>

¹¹ Playday. (2013) *2013 opinion poll summary*. <https://www.playday.org.uk/2013-opinion-poll/>

Outdoor space within housing estates has also become increasingly off-bounds for children. Adults' right to 'quiet enjoyment' of outdoor space is often a condition of tenancy agreements whereas children's right to play is not. Play bans are all too often implemented by housing providers in response to a single complaint. Patches of green and other informal space are being sold off or built on, seemingly without regard to their play value for local children.

Policy responses to date

Although there has been growing concern among parents and experts about the decline in children's freedom to play out and its implications for their health and wellbeing, there has been very little in the way of Government response. An exception in England was the 2008 national Play Strategy which committed £395m of public money to making every neighbourhood in the country safe and welcoming for children to play outside. Devastatingly, this popular and innovative plan was abandoned by the new government in 2010.

In Wales, a statutory 'play sufficiency duty',¹² introduced in 2012, is driving progressive, positive change. There have since been calls for a similar approach in England, along with a return to a strategic response from government across a range of policy areas.

One glimmer of hope in the past ten years has been the parent-led play street movement, which the Government has supported to some extent, through a funded pilot project and clarification of the legislation for local authorities to allow regular road closures.

A parent-led movement

Playing Out was started by parents on one Bristol street in 2009 and is now a UK-wide movement restoring children's right to play safely in the streets and spaces where they live, for their health, happiness and sense of belonging.

The temporary play street model is a way to reclaim doorstep space for children on a regular basis. More than 1,500 street and estate communities have now taken action in this way and 94 councils have put supportive policies in place, benefitting tens of thousands of children. The model is having proven impact for children and street communities in the following ways:

- **Children's health and wellbeing.** Children are up to [five times more physically active](#) during playing out than on normal after-school days.
- **Neighbourliness and sense of community.** [91% of adults](#) involved in Playing Out said they know more people on their street as a result and that their streets feel better places to live.
- **Active citizenship.** Over 20,000 adults have taken positive action to improve their communities.
- **Culture change and active travel.** Resident-led play streets are building the conditions needed for children to play out every day and helping to normalise the idea of children playing out near home. They are also a step towards streets becoming less car-dominated and more people-friendly.

How could government policy help?

A very simple first step would be for Government to support play streets more fully by updating legislation to remove barriers and providing clear guidance and funding so all English councils can support play streets.

Play streets, however, are by definition a temporary intervention. The many thousands of parents, children and residents taking action for change want to see more permanent, longer-term solutions. This will require a bold and imaginative shift in the way public policy conceives, designs and manages public space, especially in

¹² Section 11(1) of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 (local authority duties in respect of play)

residential streets and estates. Children's stake in their neighbourhoods, their right to play, to meet their friends and engage with the real world must be given a greater priority.

In broad terms, we want to see:

1. Public health policy that recognises, supports and promotes children's ability to play, socialise and move around where they live as a priority for their physical and mental wellbeing. Specific actions include:

- Including informal play in all sport and physical activity strategies
- Investing in a play sufficiency policy across all local authority areas
- Educating parents, decision makers and the wider public about the value of free play

2. Transport policy that puts children at the centre, ensuring that the streets where they live, work and play are not dominated by cars, including EVs. (in line with NICE guidelines). Specific actions include:

- Implementing a 'child lens' approach to transport policy
- Implementing a national 'vision zero' policy, including default 20mph limit in residential areas
- Revised road safety approach (including the law, education, training, driver tests) that places responsibility on drivers, not children
- Far greater investment in safer streets, active travel and public transport (10% of roads budget)
- Council policies to support more permanent community-led street changes
- School streets to be implemented outside every suitable school

3. Planning policy that fully considers children's need for outdoor play, including:

- Revising National Planning Policy Framework to include requirements for planning applications to meet children's need for safe, accessible outdoor space on their doorstep
- High quality guidance on child-friendly planning and design to sit alongside NPPF
- Requiring that children are considered a statutory equalities group in the planning process.
- Requiring that children are meaningfully involved in significant local planning decisions
- Child Impact Assessment as standard part of planning process

4. Housing policy that protects and prioritises children's need to play out where they live.

- Obligation on housing providers to ensure both design and management of housing supports and prioritises children's need to play out near home.
- Requirement for all registered housing providers to develop a proportionate, balanced approach to outdoor play following [existing best practice](#)
- National guidance that clarifies the distinction between play and anti-social behaviour.

5. Environmental policy ensuring all children can breathe clean air around their homes and schools.

6. Children's right to play out where they live – in streets, estates and public spaces – protected and defended in law and in practice.

- A statutory duty for councils to ensure children have sufficient play opportunities
- Housing providers could no longer issue 'play bans' or put up 'No Ball Games' signs
- Space used for play would be better protected from privatisation and development

There is growing momentum around this agenda and we feel the time is ripe for radical policy change.

Playing Out, December 2023.