



Restoring children's freedom and access to outdoor space: a manifesto

Introduction

This manifesto calls for bold action to improve the lives and life chances of the nation's children. To be happy and healthy, children need a decent amount of everyday, sociable play and physical activity. To grow into independent, capable, resilient young adults, they need a chance to experience real life, explore and take risks. To develop a sense of belonging and responsibility for others, they need to be seen and heard in their communities.

All of this used to be available for all children, for free, simply through having freedom to play out near home and to get around their neighbourhood independently. Over the past 50 years, this "universal offer" for children has been rapidly eroded and largely replaced - for those who have the means - by car journeys and paid for, organised activities or - for the majority of those who don't - an increasingly indoors, solitary, online and sedentary existence.

The long-term impact of this loss of freedom for children - and for society as a whole - is incalculable, but the causes of it are largely environmental and solutions relatively achievable. At a political level, it is understanding, prioritisation and will that are needed, far more than money. Making these changes would be life-changing for children - especially those who have least - and game-changing for their physical and mental health.

About Playing Out

[Playing Out](#) was started by parents in Bristol and established as a non-profit organisation in 2011 in order to support the spread of the (now UK-wide) [temporary play street model](#) and the related growth of a parent and resident-led movement aimed at restoring children's freedom to play out near home.

13 years on, 100 UK local authorities have a play street policy and 1,600 street communities have organised regular play streets, involving thousands of adults taking action in their own communities and directly benefitting around [48,000 children](#). On top of this, we hear from countless parents and community organisations with the same concerns for children, barriers to play and wish for change.

With this as our platform, and working with our friends and allies, Playing Out has also been a voice for children, parents and communities, calling for local and national policy that supports and enables children to play out freely near home, for their health, happiness and sense of belonging.

The problem

Even pre-pandemic, 80 per cent of children were not getting the basic hour per day of physical activity they need to be healthy and well.ⁱ One in four children now leave primary school clinically obeseⁱⁱ and children's mental health is at crisis point.ⁱⁱⁱ The problem is getting worse, not better, suggesting current Government policy is not working.

Rather than continuing to do more of the same, Government policy needs to address the root causes of the inactivity and isolation that is contributing so much to making children unhealthy and unhappy.

Children everywhere have lost the freedom they once had to play out, socialise and get around independently near home – daily activity that was cost-free and did not depend on close adult supervision, a special destination or car ownership, all of which make any activity less accessible, inclusive and democratic.

Children's time spent outdoors,^{iv} outdoor play^v, 'roaming range' and independent mobility^{vi} have all massively reduced over a few decades. And this loss of access to free (in all senses) outdoor play in shared space has [impacted children from the most disadvantaged communities the hardest](#).

Restoring children's freedom to play out near home and get around their local area could go a long way to ensuring all children, regardless of background or circumstance, are happy, healthy and part of their communities.

The barriers

Undoubtedly, the biggest barrier to children's freedom is of the dominance of the car residential streets. Car numbers have more than doubled since the 1980's and driver behaviour/culture have also changed, with streets no longer shared spaces for all. Studies show that for most parents, 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.^{vii} On top of this, almost all neighbourhood design places greater importance on car parking - typically right outside homes - rather than space for play or socializing. [ref: Transport for New Homes (2018) Transport for New Homes: Project summary and recommendations]

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 or No Ball Games signs are all too often implemented by housing providers in response to a single complaint. Patches of green and other informal space are sold off or built on, without regard to their play value for local children.

These barriers are greatest and compounded in communities facing the most disadvantage, where road danger is worse, compounded by crime and anti-social behaviour.

The solutions

[Play streets](#) - a temporary, community-led intervention - demonstrate that when children are given time and permission to play out together in a safe space on their doorstep, they choose to do this rather than be indoors, isolated and on screens. [When they play outside, children are naturally physically active](#). Research from the University of Bristol¹ using accelerometers found that children were 3-5 times more physically active during play street sessions than on an average day after school. Outdoor free play is also how children naturally develop physical literacy, socialisation skills, confidence and independence and resilience, and a sense of belonging to 'their patch.'

But, whilst bringing huge benefit for the children and communities involved and helping to shift culture through demonstration and experience, play streets and other temporary interventions are not the longterm answer. ALL children need to be able to play out and get around their neighbourhoods as part of everyday life, wherever they live.

An important part of the solution to this - and to correcting the unintended discrimination that has happened over decades - is cross-departmental Government policy that prioritises children's access to outdoor space, play and mobility and addresses the environmental barriers.

¹ https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Play-England_Why-temporary-street-closures-make-sense-for-publichealth.pdf

Our policy asks

We support widespread calls for **children's rights and wellbeing to be a top priority** for Government at the highest level, with a **co-ordinated cross-departmental approach to achieving this**. As part of this, we want to see a child 'lens' applied to policy and decision-making, informed by children's need to play outside and get around safely near home. Specifically, we want to see:

A national play street framework, ensuring residents in any local area can easily and regularly open their street for play.

National Planning Policy Framework revised to include requirements for schemes and developments to meet children's need for safe, shared doorstep play space.

Safe Streets for Children strategy including 20mph maximum speed limit where children live, a 'child lens' on street design and a revised road safety approach that places responsibility on drivers, not children.

A public awareness campaign on the importance of children's free outdoor play for mental and physical health and wellbeing and for its own sake.

Children's right to play enshrined in law, preventing unfair "play bans" and ensuring children's need to play out in communal space is balanced with the needs of others.

A Play Sufficiency duty on all local authorities

Equality Act amended to ensure children are considered as an equality group in their own right.

Conclusion

The problem of child health and wellbeing is deep-seated, serious, and getting worse. Tackling it needs a clear vision and bold steps. This manifesto sets out the urgency of the problem and the ways that policy can address it at little or no extra cost, ensuring future generations of children from all social backgrounds have access to the "free preventative healthcare" and multitude of other developmental, wellbeing and intrinsic benefits that come from everyday access to outdoor space, play, mobility and community.

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ⁱ 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> ⁱⁱ 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> ⁱⁱⁱ 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> ^{iv} 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. ^v Play England. (2010). *ICM survey for Playday*.

<http://www.playday.org.uk/campaigns-3/previouscampaigns/2010-our-place/> ^{vi} 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

^{vii} Playday. (2013) *2013 opinion poll summary*. <https://www.playday.org.uk/2013-opinion-poll/>